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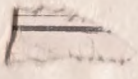
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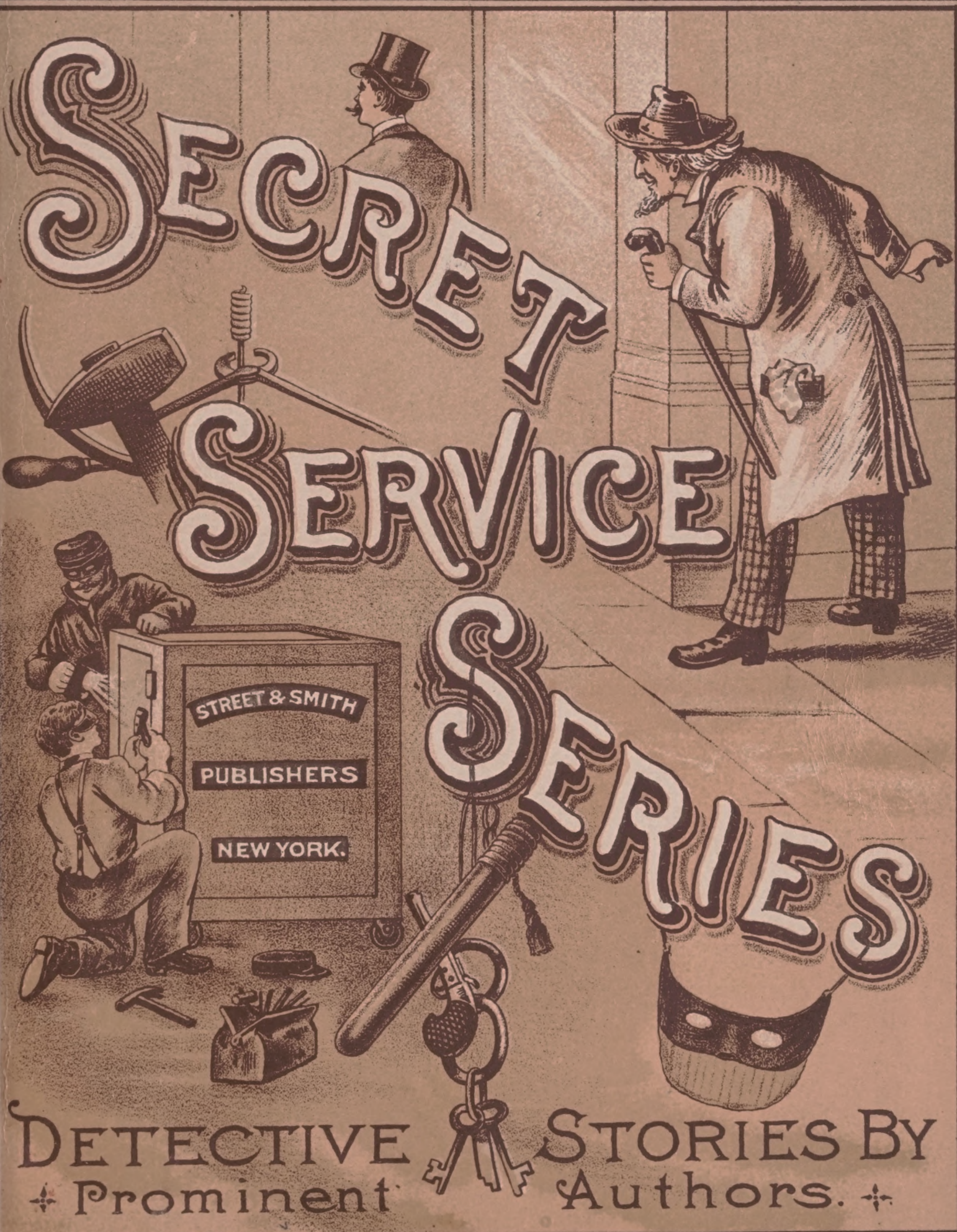
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THE PRAIRIE DETECTIVE.

BY

LEANDER P. RICHARDSON,

AUTHOR OF

"FRONTIER SKETCHES," "CAPTAIN KATE," "NO SLOUCH," "TRUE STORIES OF WILD BILL," "THE ROAD AGENTS," etc.

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THE PRAIRIE DETECTIVE.

CHAPTER I.

THE BUFFALO HUNTER.

As late as 1859 the vast prairies of Western Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming furnished employment for hundreds of hardy men who gained their livelihood by the use of rifle and trap.

Millions of buffaloes grazed upon the nutritious grasses; herds of antelopes, graceful and fleet of foot, dotted the soft undulations; great numbers of coyotes or prairie wolves, slinking from sight by day, and howling dismally by night, lived upon the carcasses of the sick and wounded animals which, falling exhausted from their places in the ranks, were left behind by their companions to die; myriads of smaller animals, whose skins were marketable, helped to attract the hunters.

But the main feature of Western life at that period was buffalo hunting. There was an eager demand for all the peltries that could be taken, and the sport of hunting the huge prairie monarchs, made the profession thoroughly enjoyable to those wild and venturesome spirits of the frontier.

The greater part of them were men who smiled at danger, and scorned the peril to which they were frequently exposed, for peril there was, on every hand.

The Indians, naturally enough, perhaps, were inclined to resent this wholesale intrusion on what they considered their domains, and wherever there was an opportunity to slaughter their white enemies they took advantage of it with an eagerness which established their intentions, if it did not add to their reputation for humane acts and thoughts.

But this was not the worst form of danger which existed. The country was full of renegade white men, who sometimes lived with the Indians, and aided them in open warfare against the whites, and sometimes acted clear of either faction, committing depredations on each, and existing as a kind of guerilla force, to harass and rob everybody they could find who had anything worth stealing. Some of them ran in couples, some in numbers of three or four. There was one regularly organized band. It was the terror of the country.

For months, sometimes, "The Bloodsuckers" would not be heard from, and people would begin to hope that they had been drawn away to some other section by promises of richer spoils.

But just as this hope would almost seem to have become a certainty, the band of assassins and robbers would turn up in some entirely unexpected quarter, and perform terrible feats of blood.

They seemed to have no settled field of labor, and, in fact, never committed two crimes consecutively in the same region. Their plan was as simple as it was fearful.

One night they would make a sudden descent

upon some camp of hunters, murder them all in cold blood, and then ride off like the wind, helping themselves to such of the stores as they chose.

Then they would take a long march across the country by circuitous routes which would not lead them into sections where they would be likely to be met and known. In a month or two, after traveling almost incessantly toward some given point, "The Bloodsuckers" would dash down with whoops and yells upon some defenseless settlement, slaying and robbing.

It may be readily imagined that such a condition of affairs kept the whole country in a fever.

No part of the West seemed free from these awful atrocities, and no hunter was sure from day to day that his cabin would not be burned before another dawn, and his loved ones murdered in cold blood before his eyes.

The marauders, who thus inspired fear and hatred, were as mysterious as they were sanguinary. No one knew whence they came, whither they went, nor who they were. Many expeditions had started upon their trail, but all had ended alike in defeat and discomfiture.

"The Bloodsuckers" never allowed grass to grow under their feet. Having sacked a settlement, they traveled away so rapidly that the swiftest pursuers were soon left behind.

One party alone succeeded in overtaking them. In the battle which ensued every man was killed save one. He was left for dead upon the field, but revived afterward, and took a great oath of revenge. His name was Ryan, and he was commonly called "Posey," though why I am at a loss to understand.

We shall see more of Posey Ryan presently.

The most mysterious personage in the outlaw band was its leader.

Many and varied were the attempts to discover his identity, but they failed, each one in succession. Numbers of people had seen him, but his name, origin, and former vocation remained enshrouded in darkness.

Everybody in the West knew of him, and he was generally spoken of as Persimmon Bill. The prefix was earned, I believe, once when the redoubtable chief was seen to eat half a peck of the fruit indicated. His real patronymic, however, was known only to himself. But whatever it might have been, no man on the border was so well known, or so thoroughly feared, at the time at which I write. He was virtually king of the whole region from the Missouri River to the Rocky mountains, and he kept up his sway with extreme success.

Old Fort Hayes, situated in the far western part of what is now the State of Kansas, a few miles south of the Smoky River, was formerly one of the principal points where the hunters gathered each autumn to remain until the following spring. The fort itself, built of native limestone, has long since been transformed into sheep-pens by a farmer, who now owns the land.

The hunters were absent, generally, all the summer, and only returned to the fort when the snow began to fly. Their families usually remained at all times under the protection of the government post, sometimes not seeing their male relatives for months together. In the heated season this life was dull and devoid of pleasure. But as the chill air of winter approached, numbers of traders from the East began

to arrive, and when the last hunter had come in from his long summer of labor, the place was full of life.

Each winter was a round of merry-making, from one day to another, and the traders, dealing liberally with the hunters, kept business in that state only described by the occidental phrase "booming."

When the sun again grew warm, and the snow began to melt away, the peltry buyers started for their homes, and the hunters began again to clean their weapons, put their traps in order, and prepare for another campaign.

Thus the order of affairs went on with almost uninterrupted sway for three or four years. Fort Hays was large and strong enough to easily resist any attacks from the Indians or marauders, and so life there was not troubled by the fears which rendered existence at other frontier posts miserable.

It was about the middle of April, 1859. The ice had floated out of the streams, the snow was melting in the hollows, and the warm days were approaching.

Everything about the settlement was in a stir, which foretold the coming evacuation.

Saddle-bags were filled with ammunition, revolvers, bright from recent scrubbing, lay in their holsters, and traps, with long shining teeth, hung upon the cabin walls, lending rude ornamentation. Old horses were exchanged for fresh ones; kegs of whisky and sides of bacon, bags of flour, and packages of pepper—everything needful for a long journey, out of the reach of stores, was purchased.

The single street was full of life and energy.

In one of the cabins at the outskirts of the town, an aged man sat upon a flour-barrel, cleaning an old fashioned Mississippi rifle. His hair, which was long and gray, hung upon his shoulders. He was of

spare build, but well shaped, and his face was full of kindly purpose and gentle thought.

A smile that was half mischievous, half pleased, was upon his lips, as he spoke, without lifting his eyes from his work:

"And so, Esther, you did not like the stranger who paid you such marked attention?"

The girl he addressed was the taller of the two who stood arm in arm before him. But for the difference in their height it would have been difficult to tell them one from the other.

Therefore, having noted the point of dissimilarity between them, a description of one will serve in all essential details for both. Face, round and plump; nose straight, and a trifle prominent; lips cherry-hued, and curving up slightly at the ends; teeth even, large, and white; eyes black, full, and twinkling merrily beneath long and drooping lashes; brows heavy and gracefully arched; forehead broad and rather round, shaded by a crest of hair which was so black that when the sun fell upon it one was sure to note a curious blue sheen which at times seemed to form a kind of halo about the head. The bright color of health lent another beauty to the face, while the neck, smooth and round, was just a trifle haughty in its erect firmness.

Thus far my descriptive pen has moved with bold and sweeping strokes upon its mission; but as it passes down over the plump shoulders, stopping for an instant to note the curves of gently swelling bust or supple waist, all unconfined by artificial process, as it wanders over full and graceful hips and passes onward over limbs that taper in the fullness of symmetrical outline, it hesitates, moves an instant in helpless indecision, and stops, baffled.

The quill has refused its work. Well and good. There are beauties which no pen can portray, no tongue describe. And with this vague hint at the surpassing loveliness of "Doc" Harper's daughters, I must retire from the unequal contest, and leave the poet's domain for the broad fields of the historian.

As her father ceased speaking, Esther's brows contracted, and out of her eyes darted a flash which told the passion of her nature—a fire that burned deep and strong, either to cheer with warmth or consume with its fierce flames.

"Like him?" she exclaimed, her handsome lip curling with scorn; "like him? I would as soon have liked a rattlesnake."

"But why this great aversion? Surely he was good looking enough."

"Yes, he was a handsome fellow, ordinarily; but did you never see him without his hat?"

"Not that I remember. What was the peculiarity exhibited then?"

"A livid scar upon his forehead; a sinister glance in his eyes. When the light, unobstructed, falls upon his face, it loses its only charms. You have seen him thus, have you not, Marian?" continued Esther, turning to her sister.

"Yes, often."

"And one night when he was here I perceived some object, as I thought, protruding from the upper part of his boot-leg. You remember his elegant cavalry boots?"

"Distinctly, but what was this object?"

"That is what I asked him. He laughed in that uneasy way of his, passed his hand down, caught hold of the article firmly, and drew it forth. It was a bowie-knife, and the largest one I ever saw. The

great blade was stained where clotted blood had been."

Esther shuddered at the thought.

"A bad man," said her father, laughing. "Carries his knife in his boot! Anything else?"

"Yes, that was not all. When he saw that I had detected the murderous weapon, he seemed to be taken with a strange whim. In fact, he was ever a moody creature. At one time he would be gay, light-hearted, and happy; then for a week at a time he would exhibit a spirit of unflagging ugliness. At those times he was silent, ill-tempered, and depressed. Well, this time I am telling you about, his mood seemed to be a reckless one. He said:

" 'Having discovered one of my weapons, you may as well see the rest.'

"With that he pulled from the back of his neck another knife, the mate of the first. It also was spotted and stained. Then from his belt, where they had hung concealed under his loose coat, he drew two heavy revolvers. From his left boot-leg there came a third. All these weapons he placed on the floor in a row, and then regarded them with an odd expression I could not understand. In fact, what in the world a man could want with all that armament is beyond my comprehension."

Esther's father had stopped rubbing his rifle, and sat looking at his daughter with a strange and questioning glance.

The old man's suspicions were awakened.

"Well," he said, "what next?"

"I asked him what could be the necessity of going about like a walking gun-shop.

"Suddenly he riveted his eyes upon my face with

that peculiar, searching look which he casts on any body he suspects.

"He seemed to be attempting to read my very soul. Then the stern lines relaxed, and the old reckless smile came back—the smile that always makes a cold chill creep over me when I see it.

" 'Those,' he said, 'are the best friends I have on earth.'

"If the sentence had come from the lips of any other person I should have laughed. But his expression, as he spoke, was so profoundly earnest, that an unknown dread began to take possession of me."

" 'But surely you never used them?' I asked.

"He thought a moment in silence. A red flush stole over his cheeks, and his yellow eyes changed to the deepest black. There was every indication of great mental excitement about his appearance, when he turned suddenly upon me, and with vehement gestures, spoke something like this:

" 'Esther, do you know what it is to be hunted from one year's end to another? Can you realize the awful misery of one whose life is sought from day to day by a thousand of his fellow-men? Is it possible for you to understand the eternal, unending agony of a man who, sleeping or waking, sees in every shadow a hidden enemy, and in every bush an assassin? Do you know what it is to start from troubled slumber, with great beads of cold perspiration standing at every pore, and every sense strained to its highest pitch, in the wild, mysterious thought that you are watched, hunted, discovered? I do—great Heaven! I do!'

"All in a moment I saw everything that had made him moody, silent, and sometimes ugly. I felt sorry for him, and told him so; whereupon he burst into

his old reckless laugh, and declared that he was literally afraid of nothing. He said he had been in many close places, and that many attempts had been made upon his life, but that he had been amply revenged upon his pursuers. Upon the stock of one of his revolvers were thirty-four nicks, cut in the wood. Each of those, he declared, stood for a life he had taken. I had never liked the man very well, in spite of his many attentions, but when he told me this, my blood froze with horror. If I had barely tolerated him before, I loathed him then. But in spite of that feeling there was a certain fascination about him which seemed to magnetize me. It was the same sensation you feel when looking at some hideous reptile. Resist the inclination as I might, I could not forbear to exclaim:

"'Who are you, who thus acknowledge nearly two-score of murders?'

"He made a motion as if to answer at once. He said:

"'My name is—— Can you keep a secret, Esther?'

"'I can, but I will not promise,' was my response.

"Again he was silent for a time, apparently trying to settle in his mind whether to make me his confidante or not. Finally he turned, and said:

"'I cannot, then, tell you who I am, although I am convinced that you would not betray me. If I wish to live I must be unknown, and therefore you will not blame me for concealing my identity.'

"From the way in which he spoke, from his uneasy manner and extraordinary measures of self-protection, I began to more than suspect him. Soon he fell to talking of other subjects, and at length, as if actuated by one of those sudden impulses which seem to guide his whole life, he took both my hands

in his, glanced quickly into my eyes, and exclaimed:

"'I love you, Esther Harper. Will you be my wife?'"

Old "Doc" Harper and his daughter, Marian, were intensely interested in the narrative by this time. On the father's face the last traces of the bantering smile had faded out, and now his eyes snapped with indignation.

"The scoundrel!" he exclaimed, involuntarily, clenching his fist. "How dare he? Why, child, what did you say?"

"For a moment I was speechless with amazement. The surprise was as complete as it was disagreeable, and I never realized until that instant how thoroughly I detested that man. I had presence of mind enough to snatch away my hands, and then almost unconsciously, I began to talk. The words came unbidden, and I was entirely without knowledge of what I was saying. I abused him, called him a murderer, assassin, robber, and everything that was vile. Through all this he sat looking me in the eye, and smiling—yes, actually smiling. My fiery words pleased his fancy. At last, as a farewell shot, and not knowing why I did it—for I was moved by some unknown influence—I charged him with being no other than the chief of the Bloodsuckers, Persimmon Bill!"

"Well! well!" exclaimed Harper, eagerly, as his daughter paused for breath, "what ensued?"

"I cannot aptly describe it. I will not pollute my tongue with the full details. Suffice it to say that he sprang to his feet, turned pale as death at the mention of that name, and cursed, and raved, and blasphemed, because I had found him out. He begged me not to expose him, and threatened my

life in the same breath. I would not promise, and I warned him that if he made an attempt to harm me, many people were within ear-shot, who would be amply revenged. That brought him to terms, and he requested me again and again not to make his real name and character known until he should have left town. I promised, partly because I felt sure he would escape even if I gave the alarm, and partly because—scoundrel, robber, murderer though he is—I admired him for his courage and audacity. Gaining this point, he still pressed his suit upon me. That, however, was too much, and I checked him instantly. Then he flew again into one of his reckless passions, and became violent. As he went out through the door, in obedience to my sternest command, he swore——"

"Well, what did he swear?" asked her father, now thoroughly aroused and angry.

"He swore that if I did not wed him peaceably he would charge down upon the post, carry me off, and compel me to be his wife. But, then, dear father, I am sure it was only braggadocia. Bold and daring as he is, he will hardly venture upon such a course as that," and Esther laughed uneasily.

"Gal, ye are mistaken. Ye don't know Persimmon Bill," said a voice from the door-way.

All three turned eagerly toward the spot whence the sounds proceeded. Two men stood there, leaning upon their rifles, and gazing quietly upon the excited family scene.

CHAPTER II.

SYCAMORE DAN.

In order to give a clear understanding of the condition of affairs, and explain the presence of the two strangers, it will be necessary to go back a little in my story, and ask my readers to accompany me as far as the national capital at Washington.

The morning train from New York had just arrived, upon a windy day in midwinter. Among the hundred or more passengers was one with whom we shall deal extensively before this narrative reaches its final chapter.

There was nothing in particular about him to arrest attention, but if you had watched him closely you could scarcely have failed to see that he was not in any respect an ordinary man. His soft felt hat, with its broad brim, was pulled well over his forehead, so as to conceal the restless workings of his watchful gray eyes, which were the most noticeable features about him. They never seemed altogether quiet, but roamed from point to point, taking in all that was going on about him. There was a singular fact connected with this strange faculty, and that was the facility which the gray eyes possessed to take in every point about anything they fell upon in a single fraction of an instant. One sweeping look up the street, and our friend knew every face, every form, every sign, and every building in his range of vision. It was the comprehensive genius of sight, trained and drilled into perfection.

But we must not stop with his eyes. The face was rather pale, and the mustache which curled upon his lip was yellow as amber. His nose was longer than the average, and not quite straight. The shape of his face rather oval than round, although neither of these terms is an exact description. It was rather longer, even, than the commonly accepted oval.

His figure was not heavy. The shoulders were set broader than the medium, but they were square, and thrown well back. However, if his body was not broad, it was thick. From the breastbone through to his spine, the distance was more than usually great. He was tall, too. So tall that he seemed slim—which he was not—and reminded one of a graceful reed swaying in the breeze. His movements were quick, bold, graceful, indicating agility and an active system.

Take him all in all, he was a man to hold your attention when you had once fixed it upon him.

On the morning alluded to he walked down Pennsylvania avenue, carrying a small traveling-bag in his hand. At the lower end of the avenue he turned suddenly in through an open door-way, and ascended the stairs. Arrived at the second floor, his eyes fell upon a door which had a ground-glass panel let into it. Painted upon this semi-transparent background were the words:



Turning the knob, he pushed the door open and walked briskly into the room. A clerk, sitting behind a heavy French walnut desk of rich design, was the only person in the apartment. He looked up

as the stranger entered, and waited for him to introduce himself.

"Is Ryerson in?" asked the new arrival, in clear, incisive tones.

The clerk, startled out of his lethargy by the assurance of a person who had the temerity to speak of his chief by his surname and in that familiar tone, forgot to yawn before he replied:

"Yes, sir. Shall I give him your name?"

"That's what you're here for, I reckon," responded the stranger, without changing a muscle of his face. "Here's the card."

The clerk did not stop to reflect that life was a bore, as government clerks are wont to do, but took the bit of pasteboard between his fingers, and walked away through an open door which led to an inner apartment.

"I wonder who he can be?" thought he. "Perhaps he's a duke, or a foreign minister of some kind. 'Ryerson,' to be sure! Well, he's a cool one, anyhow. Let's see—what's his name?" and the government employee cast his eyes over the card which he held in his hand. There, in bold letters, was the name:

DAN BURDETTE, New York.

The clerk made no verbal comment, but gave vent to a long, low whistle of surprise.

"Show him in at once!" exclaimed the chief; and the subordinate lost no time in obeying the command.

"So that's Dan Burdette, eh?" he muttered, as the stranger passed out of sight. "Well, I never saw him before, although I've heard enough about him. So that's the greatest thief-taker in America—the

boss detective. Blessed if he doesn't look it, too! Thunder! what eyes he's got! But I wonder what he is doing in Washington?"

The clerk was not destined to find out. But you and I, being privileged characters upon this occasion, may take a peep inside the little room, and without being observed, may listen to the conversation.

The apartment contained a sofa, two or three easy-chairs, an elegant desk, a table, and a polished sideboard.

The walls were hung with pictures, and the carpet was thick and soft to the touch. A genial fire glowed upon the hearth.

Behind the desk sat an elderly man in spectacles.

As Burdett entered, this person rose and came forward to meet him.

"Halloa, Dan!" he exclaimed, heartily, grasping his visitor's hand with a cordial grip. "Glad to see you."

"Received your telegram last night," responded Burdette, in his customary unruffled way. "Packed my valise at once, caught the midnight train, and here I am."

"Prompt as ever, I see. Well, sit down and make yourself at home. Take off that coat."

The garment was soon hanging across the back of a chair, and its owner, planted in another luxurious piece of upholstery, had his feet upon the table."

"Now, Ryerson," he said, when he had settled himself calmly, and was contemplating a speck of dust upon one of his boots, "what's in the wind? I reckon you are on the track of a good thing, else you wouldn't have sent in such a confounded hurry for me. Let's hear it, whatever it may be."

"Good thing! I should say it was. But before we talk business, let's refresh the inner man."

The chief went over to the sideboard, and took down a bottle bearing the legend "Old Stag."

Together with this he produced two glasses, which he placed on the table between himself and his guest.

A box of cigars soon followed.

"Business before pleasure," said Burdette, with a smile, tossing off a draught of the decoction. "So here goes, old man."

After a moment of meditation, as the smoke curled up from their cigars, they were ready for business.

"Well, Dan, I am going to set you on a scent that it will be a pleasure to you to follow. I am going to give you a 'plant' you have wanted for some time—and one which will furnish you an opportunity to wipe out an old score."

"All right," responded the detective, with an unmoved face; "what is it?"

"I have found traces of Bill Creighton!"

"What!"

The polished boots came down from the table like lightning, and Dan Burdette, quicker than a flash, was on his feet, all aglow with excitement. The color came into his cheeks, his wonderful eyes flashed fire, and his slender fingers closed mechanically, like the teeth of a trap.

"I thought that would stir you up a bit," observed the chief, with a self-satisfied smile.

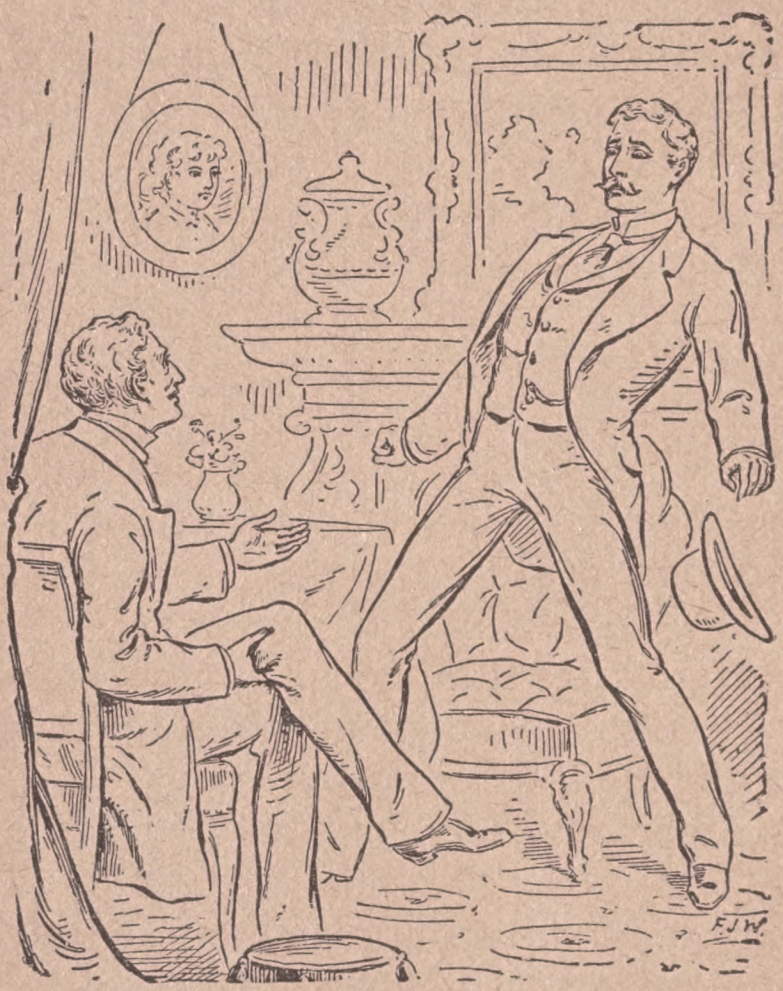
"Stir me up? Of course it does. Why, I would rather catch Bill Creighton than do almost anything that is pleasant. He is sharp enough, though. Why, it is fully four years since we have heard from him."

"Yes, and I have traced nearly all his movements during that time."

"Well, let's hear about it."

"All right. You remember the last time you took him for counterfeiting out in Illinois?"

"Remember it? I should think I did. And I am not likely to stop remembering it just yet. Eight



"I THOUGHT THAT WOULD STIR YOU UP A BIT."

stabs, four pistol balls, and a broken shoulder. What! A man doesn't forget that kind of thing very easily. I captured him, he was convicted, sent to Joliet, and finally escaped. Rewards were offered for his recapture by four States, two cities, and one private individual, making a pleasant little sum to take in."

"Yes. The total foots up to $62,000 Well, as I was about to say, Creighton was joined by several of his counterfeiting gang, and went West. Since then he has killed a great many men, and is still making things very lively. He is known as Persimmon Bill, and he commands the best organized and most desperate party of outlaws on this continent."

"The duse! Is that Bill Creighton?"

And Dan Burdette whistled in surprise.

"It is he, and no mistake. Do you still hanker for the honor of taking him?"

"Did you ever know me to weaken?"

"No, Dan. I can't say that I did."

"Well, then, why ask such a question? I shall start West to-morrow. Where was he last heard from?"

"On the western border of Kansas. But he is a migratory being, and you can't count on him as sticking in one locality."

"That's all right.

"When I go after him, he is bound to come, sooner or later. Besides, I want to get even for that terrible dose he gave me last time we met."

"What assistance do you want?"

"None."

"But you don't think of going alone, surely."

"Don't I? Now I do—just that."

"Well, I suppose it is useless to dissuade you. But I am afraid."

"Oh, don't you worry about me. I have done more difficult things than this, and I shall not weaken now."

"All right, Dan. But I will say that I am empowered to add a sufficient sum to the rewards thus far offered to bring them up to a total of $70,000.

This is for the production of Bill Creighton, dead or alive. If you take him living, I will add $5,000 to that amount. He is the worst criminal in America, to-day, and his capture will be well worth the sum mentioned."

"Then I am to understand that my commission is a roaming one, and that I am to go where I please and do as I like, so long as I catch my man."

"Exactly so. And if you need money, draw on me."

"All right, I will do so. Good-by, Ryerson. You will hear from me before long, and as sure as you are a living man I will capture Persimmon Bill within the year if it costs my life."

With a graceful bow and a laughing farewell Dan Burdette strode out upon the street.

In half an hour he was on the cars, bound for New York, and at seven o'clock the following afternoon he was flying as fast as steam could carry him toward the city of Chicago.

CHAPTER III.

STRIKING THE SCENT.

The detective stopped but an hour in Chicago, and that only to talk with an old friend who had formerly been a frontiersman. When the two separated, Dan had a second valise to carry. In twenty-four hours he landed at Kansas City, Missouri, on the banks of the "Big Muddy." There he climbed the hill to the hotel, where he registered as "Sycamore Dan" from Ohio. He went immediately to his room, opened his new valise, and spread the contents upon his bed. After that he divested himself of his outer clothing, and prepared to rehabilitate himself.

With that end in view he selected from the articles he had already placed upon the couch a rough woolen shirt, buckskin pantaloons, leggins, mocassins, and coat, and a broad-brimmed felt hat, bound about the crown with a heavy strip of wild-cat fur. A claw taken from the same animal dangled over the rim behind.

He then fished up from the bottom of the bag an old leather belt, attached to which were two heavy holsters containing each a Colt's revolver of the largest size. Between them, also fastened to the strap, was a heavy bowie-knife and a box for cartridges.

No time was lost in putting on this belt, after which Dan Burdette, in his new disguise, viewed himself complacently in the cracked mirror which hung against the wall.

The metamorphosis was complete. But to be sure of avoiding recognition, he produced a razor and removed his handsome mustache. His costume and accouterments all bore evidences of former use. It may be stated that he had selected them on that account. A new outfit, he reflected, would have aroused suspicion, which was the very thing he wished to avoid. His Chicago friend, in selling him the clothing he wished to buy, had conferred upon Dan the greatest possible favor.

When the detective had assured himself that his disguise was beyond penetration, he packed up his civilized clothing, locked the valise, and strolled down stairs into the office, where a number of men were sitting or standing about idling away the time.

His tall form and picturesque costume attracted general attention, and many were the inquiries addressed to the clerk as to his identity. That functionary could only point to the somewhat vague appellation scrawled upon the register, and acknowledged his own ignorance.

Dan sauntered carelessly down the main street until he saw a gunsmith's sign. He entered the store, and, after careful examination, selected an old Kentucky rifle capable of throwing an ounce ball.

Ammunition, bullet-molds, and revolver cartridges were purchased next, and the detective-scout returned to his hotel.

The next two or three days he spent in blinding those who questioned him about his former life, and learning from them all that was possible about the country which he was about to visit.

For these purposes he gave out that he had spent his years among the forests which at that time lined the banks of the Wabash River, and that he was by

nature and education a hunter. He was going, he said, to seek a fresh field for the exercise of his profession in the great West. This gave him an excellent excuse for asking all sorts of questions as to the country, people, and routes.

To still further mislead any who might look upon him with suspicious eyes, he assumed the broad dialect of the frontier, and I am bound to say that in a very short time he had so completely mastered it that the sharpest person would have scarcely suspected he was feigning.

His skillful inquiries elicited a great deal of useful information. He discovered that there were only two ways of reaching the point he had determined to visit first—Fort Hays. One way was to cross the plains in a wagon, and the other was to go by boat.

It was still too early in the season to adopt the former method. In many places the snow remained yet, effectually blocking possible progress. The water route was his only alternative. The rivers were comparatively free from ice, and a journey of the length he proposed to make could be accomplished easily.

The route lay up the Missouri for three or four miles, then turned into the Kansas, or Kaw River, following its course westward until the mouth of the Smoky should be reached. By pushing on up this stream he could gain a point only a few miles distant from his objective spot, whence a walk overland could be made without difficulty.

He was confident of the feasibility of his scheme, and broached the subject to several persons with whom he had become acquainted.

Dan next began to search for some person who would guide him on his journey. Here the first ob-

stacle presented itself. Money was plenty, and men did not care to work while it could be avoided. Besides, the trip was a long one, and few would have wished to attempt it at any time.

He was lying in his apartment one afternoon, trying to make up his mind to the prospect of having to make the trip alone, and trust to luck for getting the right routes, when a tap came upon his door.

"Come in," said Dan, and a bell boy entered the room.

"Two men down stairs wish to see you, sir," said the youth, with the accent of awe which a young boy ever feels for a man of wide reputation.

"Trot 'em up," responded the detective, languidly, wondering who they could be.

In a few minutes the lad returned with the two visitors. Dan had never seen either of them before. He was sure of that as he covered them with his sweeping glance. They were not such honest-looking persons as would excite hope in the mind of an evangelist.

On the other hand their appearance was sinister in the extreme. They were both tall and powerful fellows, and had faces that would have done credit to any rogues' gallery in the world.

As they caught Dan's eye leveled upon them they bowed, with a notable absence of grace or ease, and saluted him.

"Mornin', stranger," said the taller, in a kind of guttural prowling tone.

"Mornin', yerself," responded the detective, simulating the dialect he had so lately learned. "Waltz in yere an' take a cheer."

The visitors complied with the request, and proceeded at once to business.

"Air you the rooster they call Sycamore Dan?" asked the man who had spoken before.

"Ye've guessed it, sure 'nuff," rejoined Dan.

"An' did ye give out as how ye wanted somebody fer to guide ye across to Fort Hays?"

"Kerrect agin. Ye're doin' well, so go ahead."

"Wal, stranger, me an' my pard yere will do the job fer ye, in good shape at a mod'rit figger. We air goin' back thet way ourselves, an' ef ye like we'll give ye a h'ist. Is it a go?"

"It are. What d'ye want in the shape o' cash?"

"Wal, we'll be easy with ye. Say fifty dollars, an' you to furnish grub, boat, an' all that, we to do all the work. Ain't that easy 'nuff?"

"It suits me to a T. When will ye be able to open up the start?"

"To-morrow mornin'. Is that soon 'nuff?"

"Thet will do. Good-day, gentlemen."

His guests departed, and Dan gave a sigh of relief. At last the vexatious question was settled, and he had managed the difficult problem of securing guides. He did not half like the appearance of his new employees, but he reflected that men were frequently better than they looked, and added to himself that he was not afraid of any two men who ever walked the earth. And so he dismissed the matter from his mind without another thought.

Bright and early in the morning he went down to the river, where his boat, all ready for the voyage, was lying. It was a trim little craft, of good size, but light draught, and very easily paddled through the water. The two guides were on hand ahead of him, and after making sure that all was fully prepared, they pushed off, and started up the sluggish stream.

For a time the men were all silent, each apparently absorbed in his own thoughts. But after a time they grew more companionable, and the conversation ceased to flag.

Dan learned that both of his companions were hunters, who roamed the prairies in summer, and spent the colder months in Kansas City or some such populous place. The larger of the two, he of the guttural voice, gave his name as Jim Slavin, while his assistant at the oars, who seldom spoke unless questioned, called himself Jack Robinson.

The detective, who sat in the stern, steering the fragile craft, did not quite trust these fellows, and imagined they had lied to him about their names. But he said nothing, and waited for some fact to turn up, which should either confirm his suspicions or set them at rest. In the meantime everything went along smoothly, and the voyagers made rapid progress. The currents of the Western streams are seldom swift, and so, by keeping along close in shore, it was not difficult to make good headway. They rowed steadily by day, and rested at night, sleeping on the ground beside crackling fires, and rolled in blankets.

After two weeks of steady work they turned from the broad bed of the Kaw into the Smoky, which was heavily swollen by the melting snows. Another week in the boat brought them near their destination. At last they could see the end of the long journey directly before them, only a day ahead.

Thus far there had been but one slight misunderstanding between the master and his men. Learning that they had been on the border a good deal in the past few years, Dan set about "pumping" them, to learn what they knew of the man he was search-

ing for. He managed his scheme skillfully, but the moment Persimmon Bill's name was mentioned the two guides closed up like oysters. He managed to learn that they had heard of the great robber, but they either would not or could not tell him anything definite about the man he was in pursuit of.

From that time the guides shunned their employer. At night, after supper, instead of sitting and smoking their evening pipe with him, while all three talked together about the day's events, they would skulk off together, leaving Dan alone to ruminate in solitude.

He would not have minded this, ordinarily, but traveling with them in the midst of a great wilderness, and more or less at their mercy a large part of the time, he felt disturbed at the turn matters had taken, and assumed a more watchful demeanor at all times.

For the past two days the men had given up their strange behavior, and seemed to have returned to the ways they observed before the rupture occurred. They were pleasant and affable, and ceased their long moonlight walks. One of them even returned to the subject of Persimmon Bill of his own accord, but did not talk on it very long or very explicitly. His object seemed to be the discovery of Dan's motive for inquiring about the robber chief. But the detective was too sharp to be caught, and readily discovered the design.

On the last evening of their journey, Burdette and Robinson sat by the fire, smoking in silence. Slavin had gone away for the ostensible purpose of bringing in some wood. He had been absent some moments, when Robinson began to talk with a great deal of volubility. His manner, so utterly at variance with

his usual habit of speaking only in monosyllables, attracted Dan's attention at once. But the guide continued, gesticulating vehemently, and talking on all sorts of subjects.

The detective became suspicious, and fell to watching the movements of the man narrowly. As the talk waxed faster, Dan became more and more firmly convinced that something was at the bottom of it, more important than the subject-matter of the words seemed to indicate.

A vague, strange uneasiness was upon him—a kind of magnetic presentiment of evil. His active brain was trying to solve the mystery when a twig cracked close behind him.

In an instant the whole plot flashed upon him. Robinson had talked to attract his attention, while the other villain was stealing upon him from the rear.

He sprang partly to his feet, and whirled half way around to meet his treacherous assailant.

But the warning had come too late; for even as he moved a crushing weight fell upon his head, and his senses left him.

The detective fell to the ground, limp and lifeless.

"Great Heaven! Jim, you have killed him," exclaimed Robinson, excitedly.

The older ruffian coolly dropped his club, placed his hand upon his victim's heart, and replied:

"Sure enough. He's dead as a herring. Let's go through him."

They fell to work examining the pockets of the fallen man, but found nothing beyond a hundred dollars and some ammunition.

Dan had wisely concealed his other valuables in inner pockets.

When the search was completed the men looked at each other in blank amazement.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Slavin. "Can it be that we were wrong in suspecting him? There are no proofs."

"Well, it's done now," rejoined his companion, "and we may as well carry the news to the chief. For one, I'm sorry we did this. It is an ugly job!"

"That's a fact. But as you say, the work is done and can't be helped. What shall we do with the carcass?"

By this time it was quite dark, excepting in the narrow circle dimly illumined by the firelight. The ghastly face of the detective, smeared and clotted with blood, shone out in deathly relief against the dark ground.

As the men looked upon his distorted features, and then glanced into the darkness which walled them in, they shuddered involuntarily at what they had done.

At that moment the sounds of little wavelets in the stream, plashing up against the banks, fell upon their ears.

"Toss it into the river," said Robinson. "The tide will carry it away. And if he is not dead the water will finish him."

"Good!" responded Slavin. "Dead men tell no tales."

And the murderers, raising the nerveless figure from the ground, bore it to the brink of the stream.

"Heave ahead!" cried Robinson.

"One, two, three!"

As he counted the two men swayed the form of Sycamore Dan to and fro. At the word "three" they tossed it far out toward the middle of the river,

where it fell with a loud splash, and then sank from sight in the murky waters which surrounded and closed over it like a shroud of darkness.

CHAPTER IV.

SYCAMORE DAN MEETS POSEY RYAN.

The water in the river was ice-cold. As it enveloped the quivering form of the detective, it sent a chilling shock through his every vein. But it also had another and more satisfactory effect, for it restored him to consciousness.

The point where he was thrown into the stream was just above a sharp curve in the river-bed. The current there was much faster than at places where the course lay straight across the prairie, and it carried the body rapidly away in the darkness.

Sycamore Dan was out of the sight of his would-be assassins within an instant of the time he touched the water, and by the time he had returned to a knowledge of what was transpiring around him, he was fairly beyond the curve.

When his eyes opened, he was close to the surface of the stream, struggling mechanically, for his action was not prompted by any workings of his mind. It resulted merely from the instinctive machinery of his physical organism.

He was a capital swimmer, equally at home in the water as on dry land. And when he fully realized his position, he struck out boldly with all his returning strength toward the shore.

The chilling influence of the elements in which he was submerged checked the flow of blood somewhat, although such a quantity had already passed from

him that his system was greatly weakened. The difficulty of his work was also greatly augmented by the current, which, directly below the sharp point of land which, jutting boldly outward, changed the course of the stream, sent the full sweep of water over against the opposite shore in a diagonal course. Therefore, his efforts to reach the bank for which he had started brought him almost directly in contact with the full force of the heavy current.

But, knowing his great strength as a swimmer, and forgetting that he was laboring under great and unusual disadvantages, he plunged courageously across the tide, covering the distance with long and powerful strokes.

A dull, aching pain in his head, reminded him of the tremendous blow he had received, but he could not stop for an instant to investigate his injuries. He knew that each second he remained inactive carried him farther away from the point he desired to reach. And so he pushed ahead through the water, each sweep of his long arms telling upon his already weakened system.

His large pistols, knife, and box of ammunition weighed heavily upon him and checked his progress, but still he fought with determination and energy.

Almost any other man, under those conditions, would have unbuckled his belt, and allowed the weapons to sink to the bottom of the river.

But Sycamore Dan was not like ordinary men. He was used to peril in every form, and had faced danger often.

The thought of leaving his accouterments behind flashed upon his mind, but was dismissed in the same breath. It would leave him free, but what of that? Even if he succeeded in reaching the shore, what

could he do without weapons? No; he would carry them to land with him, or else accompany them to a resting-place in the farthest depths of the river. They were his best friends, and it was with a feeling of loyal pride that he determined not to forsake them even for an instant.

The cold now began to influence him. His sinews grew stiff, and his limbs commenced to feel numb. The long strokes of his strong arms became shorter at each successive effort, and an awful chill crept through his frame. He could feel it, first at the extremities and then converging toward the central parts of his body. Slowly, gradually it approached, seeming to freeze his very vitals with its damp, clammy touch.

His muscles grew powerless, and his strokes more feeble as he struggled vainly against the awful sensation spreading over him. Was it death? In the innermost recesses of his heart he almost feared it was. But he never once thought of despair. He would struggle against fate as long as he could, and then—— Well, what then? He had looked into the eyes of the grim monster before, and he could do it again without flinching. If he must end his life there, it should never be said that he gave up to his destiny without a manly effort to save himself.

But the moment was fast coming when he could no longer carry on the unequal contest. His limbs refused their office, and he could not control them.

Slowly his feet sank toward the bottom. His hands fell helplessly to his sides. He threw his head back, and drew a long, deep breath, which he thought was to be the last. Then with his blanched face pointing to heaven, and the icy chill enveloping his heart, he began to sink.

His feet touched some hard, unyielding substance. The sensation thrilled him like an electric shock. In a single particle of an instant the stagnant blood rushed through every artery and every vein, with hot, fountain-like dashes. Fixing his feet in the ground, he threw himself forward.

The land ascended gradually, and in less than a minute the tall form of Sycamore Dan stood high upon the bank.

But his long struggle had told upon his system. The strength of a moment ago fled as rapidly as it had come. And with a wild motion of his arms, and murmuring, "Great Heaven, I thank thee!" he fell fainting upon the ground.

He remained there a long time—how long he could not tell. When at last the warm tide of restored life began to come back he opened his eyes with a strange sensation. It was as if some animal, with its hot tongue, were licking his face. At first the bright light half dazzled him, for the sun had risen an hour ago, and its mellow rays fell across his vision.

But presently a deep sigh escaped him, and his breath began to come and go again with its old freedom. His first impression he found to be correct. Some animal *was* licking his brow. Just as he was about to make a movement to discover what it was, a deep and mellow voice fell upon his ear:

"Come off, Vixen. Don't ye see thet he's a-comin' to?"

The soft tongue immediately ceased to caress him, and its owner retired stealthily.

With an effort Dan turned over to get a sight at the person who had spoken. A few paces away,

leaning with folded arms upon a long rifle, stood a man of striking appearance.

His figure was large, yet not clumsy.

His shoulders were broad and noticeably square, and his arms were both long and heavy. From his face, which was full of determination, one would have taken him to be about thirty years old.

A brown mustache was the only hair growing upon his face.

His attitude was easy and natural, and his whole appearance was picturesque in the extreme.

The animal designated "Vixen," in response to her master's call, was sitting upon the ground at his feet, looking up into his face with an expression of intelligence and affection. Dan looked from one to the other of his new acquaintances with a questioning glance, but finally his eyes settled fixedly upon the strange brute which had been wooing back his lost consciousness.

It was an odd-looking beast, and the detective could not remember having seen its like before among all the long list of family pets he had at different times in his life come in contact with. It could scarcely have been more than two feet and a half in length, and when standing, was about twelve or fourteen inches high.

Its body was covered with long fur, the main color of which was a grayish yellow, offset by small spots of a darker hue. These spots, instead of being scattered at random over the whole body, were so distributed as to form a series of broken stripes. The animal's head was shaped something like that of an ordinary house-cat, its only differences being increased size, and a thicker, blunter formation. The ears were large, and pointed straight upward. At

their tips were two little tassels of fur standing perfectly erect. The brute's tail was short, and adorned with a more luxuriant covering than the remainder of the body.

As Dan finished his mental inventory of the pair, which was completed in his accustomed rapid manner, he saw a slight smile pass across the stranger's face. He made a strong effort to rise to his feet, but his exhaustion was so complete that the struggle was a failure, and he sank back upon his elbow.

"Mornin', stranger," observed the giant, as an opening sentence in the conversation. And then, without awaiting a reply, he continued: "Reckon ye've hed a tough racket on't, hain't ye? Thet's a bad clip ye got o' the craniham. Yere! Take a snifter outen this bottle, an' ye'll feel better."

Coming forward he placed a flask to the detective's lips, and poured a long draught down his throat.

The liquor had a good effect, and Dan was able to sit up.

"Who are you?" were the first words he uttered.

"Who am I? Oh, well, I ain't much of anybody. Folks out hyar call me Posey Ryan. I'm a buffaler hunter, an' I live at Fort Harp. Kin I tell ye any thin' mower?"

All this was spoken with a kind of pleasant sarcasm which pleased Dan mightily, and he laughed outright.

"Kum, now," said Ryan, "quit that laffin'. Ye ain't in no condishun to cackle just yet. Hyar, let me hev a squint at thet wound onto yer cocynut."

And he fell to examining the long gash made by Jim Slavin's club.

"Fire an' brimstone!" he exclaimed. "Thet's a bad one. Reckon I'll hev to do it up a leetle."

"Thank you," responded Dan. "I'll be obliged if you will."

Before he had fairly delivered himself of this brief speech, Ryan produced his bowie-knife and a wet-stone. He then proceeded to sharpen his blade, employing the time by terse replies to Dan's many questions.

"Thet animile?" he said, throwing a sidelong glance at his pet. "Why, thet's what we call a catamount. Some folks call it a wild-cat."

"But I thought those were not capable of being tamed."

"Nuther they ain't—ez a ginral thing. Cos why? Wal, cos nobody don't know how to git to work at 'em. This yere one I ketched when she war a leetle bit of a kitten, not mor'n three days old. I brot her up on the bottle—made a wet-nuss outer myself fer her benefit, an 'she 'preshyates it. Don't ye, gal?"

The inquiry was addressed to Vixen, who was regarding her master with a glance which seemed to say she understood every word. By way of reply, she rubbed her head against his knee affectionately.

When Ryan's knife had been sharpened satisfactorily, he shaved away the hair from around Dan's terrible wound, and then with a coarse needle stitched the gaping lips together.

That accomplished, he bound up the spot, thus completing a clever bit of border surgery. The operation was far from painless, but Dan endured it with the stern courage of a stoic. All this time his strength was coming back, so that by the aid of another refreshing pull at the flask, he was soon able to walk.

Up to this time Ryan had asked no question about Dan, and the detective did not feel called upon to

explain. But, after awhile, when the two had begun their walk up the river, he mentioned the occurrence which had led to his condition when found beside the stream. He was very much surprised, however, when his companion checked his words, saying that he already knew what Dan was about to tell him.

"Why, how's that?" asked the detective.

"Oh, simple 'nuff. This morning I was prowlin' round over nigh the bank on the Smoky, when I ketched sight o' a camp-fire. Vixen, hyar, beginned to git excited, an' by thet I knowed as how summat crooked was goin' on. So I crept up nigh to the two duffers what was in camp, an' to my wonder, I foun' myself face to face with two o' the worst men in all Persimmon Bill's bad gang.

"Now I don't like thet crowd very derned much, an' so I drawed bead onto the biggest 'un, an' blazed away. He drapped dead into his tracks, but t'other one got away. I tried to reach him with my six-shooter, but 'twan't no use, fer the derned thing wouldn't go off. Vixen would hev nabbed him ef it hedn't been fer the boat. He got into thet, an' pushed off fer t'other side, an' we couldn't foller, of coorse. When I got to camp I foun' blood all 'round onto the grass, an' also some papers w'ich I knowed didn't belong to neither o' them snoozers. Then I seen tracks leadin' to the river, an' I knowed in a minnit what was up. So I jest started down the Smoky, an' fin'lly I found ye. Lucky, wasn't it?"

"It was indeed. And you say you killed one of the men?"

"I reckon I did. Fire an' brimstone! two ounces o' lead through the brain is a good dose fer any

rooster. But we're nigh thar now, an' ye kin see fer yerself."

A moment later they reached the spot where Dan had been nearly murdered. There, lying cold and stark upon the ground, with his glassy eyes fixed on space, lay all that was left of Jim Slavin.

The detective's rifle was found lying where the surviving ruffian in his hasty retreat had left it. It's owner picked up the weapon joyfully, and was about to suggest to Ryan that they should begin their journey toward the fort, when the borderman accosted him for the first time with a serious face.

"Look hyar, stranger," he began. "I foun' ye layin' alone and wounded onto the perairie, an' I restored ye to life, as one man orto do with 'nother. So far so good; but afore you an' me goes ahead together I've got to know who ye are, an' what is yer connection with thet Persimmon Bill outfit. If so be ye're squar an' honest, why all right. But don't ye try to play nothin' crooked onto me, 'cos I won't stan' thet."

The buffalo hunter had spoken with vehemence.

Dan reflected an instant before he replied. Why should he not tell this man his mission? From the fact that he had ruthlessly slain one of the gang it was evident that he was the enemy of the band. Besides, looking into the face of his newly found friend, he saw what told him that any secret would be safe in Ryan's possession.

Without further parley, then, he recounted his former adventures with Bill Creighton, his orders from the chief of the Secret Service to capture the villain, and the incidents which had already fallen in his way.

The scout heard his story without a word of com-

ment, only watching his face to see if he told the truth.

When Dan finished speaking, Ryan held out his hand with the single syllable, "Good!" He then drew one of his revolvers, and called the detective's attention to the number of notches cut into the stock. One of them was quite fresh, evidently having been made within a few hours.

"What are they?" questioned Sycamore Dan.

"Every one o' them nicks stands for a Bloodsucker what has sucked his last suck. The one I put thar this mornin' makes the hull number nine. Mister Sycamore, you an' me is on the same lay. S'posing' we form a pardnership an' work together. How does that strike you?"

"It touches me on the right spot. Let us shake hands on it."

The two men clasped hands, and then the flask reappeared.

"Hyar's to the new firm!" cried Ryan, tossing off a bumper.

"Long life and success to Posey Ryan and Sycamore Dan!" assented the detective, following the example set by his new "pardner."

The two then set off across the prairie, Vixen trotting at their heels. During the two or three hours thus employed they laid their plans, and agreed that nothing should be said about the way they had met.

Dan learned that while his companion had met many members of the band of robbers, and had at different times joined in desperate encounters with them, still he had never knowingly seen the chief.

In fact, he explained, no one on the border had seen him.

Dan at once described the general appearance of

Bill Creighton, and had scarcely finished when Ryan fell into a brown study.

"What are you thinking of?" asked the detective.

"Why, jest sich a chap as ye picter hez been at Fort Hays all winter. Hez Bill Creighton got a scar onto his mug?

"He has indeed—one particularly livid. It is upon his forehead over his left eye."

"Great gosh! It's the same feller. Fire an' brimstun', but thet rooster hez got cheek! Let's hurry up, and we may ketch him yet. He was thar' when I left, three days ago."

The two friends pressed ahead, and arrived at the door of old Doc Harper's cabin just in time to hear Esther's last sentences, as described in a previous chapter.

As the deep bass tones of the scout fell upon the ears of those assembled within the hut, all turned to see the speaker, who was recognized at once, and invited to enter. Nothing loth he walked through the door-way, followed by Dan and Vixen.

The detective was introduced at once as an old friend and former partner of Ryan's, under the title he had previously assumed.

The conversation became general, Dan talking in an animated way, falling back again into the dialect he had picked up during his brief stay in Kansas City.

The wound in his scalp was explained by a story to the effect that he had received it in an encounter with a buffalo which he had wounded. Such matters were of frequent occurrence, and he was readily believed.

After some further conversation about Persimmon Bill, during which Dan professed ignorance of the

robber chief's identity, the party began to talk of the time for starting out upon the annual hunt.

"When d'ye start?" asked Ryan.

"To-morrow morning," replied Marian. Do you go with the train?"

"What a curious question," responded the scout. "Did ye ever know a huntin' party to start 'thout Posey Ryan bein' along? An' thet reminds me ez how my traps need a leetle fixin' afore we go much furder.

"So come along, Dan."

The partners walked away to complete preparations for joining the company going out to scour the plains for buffaloes.

CHAPTER V.

TRAITORS IN CAMP.

As soon as Dan and Posey had left Doc Harper's hut, silence fell upon the group. The sisters stood in the open door-way gazing after the men who had gone, while their father, with eyes fixed on the ground and hands folded, seemed trying to read an answer to some deep and perplexing problem.

After some moments spent thus, the girls fell into conversation, the subject, naturally enough, being the two persons who were nearly out of sight down the main street.

"What a strange looking man," said Esther, in an abstracted way.

"Which of them, sister?" was the questioning response of Marian.

Her sister turned with a merry twinkle in her eye.

"Why, both of them, for that matter. But you need not be jealous, because I was not then referring to the personal appearance of Posey Ryan."

Marian colored up to the roots of her hair, but said nothing in reply to the sly thrust her sister had administered.

"No," continued Esther; "I meant the stranger—Sycamore Dan, I believe they called him. Did you notice what strange manners he has?"

"I did not see so much in his manner as I did in his eyes. Why, sister, they are wonderful. When he looked at me he appeared to read every thought in my heart. I never felt so strangely in my life."

"Yes, that struck me, too. When his eyes met mine I felt fascinated. I could not look away from him, if it had been to save my life. Then, too, there were marks about him which told me he was not always used to this rough life. He seemed to be foreign to it, and yet acclimated. I own frankly, that I cannot altogether understand him."

"What was it you noticed, sister? He seemed to me like all the other men about here, excepting the peculiarity of his eyes."

"Did you see his hands?"

"I don't know that I paid particular attention to them. Why do you ask?"

"They were as white and as soft as a woman's. The palms were unmarked by the little tufts of callous flesh which all men used to rough work have on theirs. Mark my words, there is some mystery about him, and I will solve it before I get through."

"Esther, my dear," said her father, who had been so thoroughy absorbed in his thoughts that her words did not reach him, "come here a moment, please."

The daughters both responded to his call.

"What is it, father?" asked the girl.

"Ryan, before he went away, gave me a word of whispered advice, and I have been thinking whether it is best to abide by it or not.

"I have finally decided that it shall be as you say."

"What is it, father? Speak on."

"He heard enough of what passed concerning Persimmon Bill, to make up his mind that something must be done to avert possible danger. When the men have left this spot for the buffalo trail, the post will be greatly weakened. The fact that the chief of the Bloodsuckers has been here all winter,

leads to the belief that he contemplates a raid on the place, and that theory is strengthened by the vague threats he uttered to you. If he thought he could capture and carry you off, I am sure he would not hesitate an instant in his work. Therefore, to get way from this seemingly threatened calamity, I have thought it best to ask you if there is any reason why you would not like to join the party of hunters? The trip will be a trying one to you, but it is best to be on the safe side in times of probable danger."

Esther did not hesitate in her reply. In fact, her face was crimsoned by a flush of eagerness.

"Why, of course, I will go. You know it has always been my pet wish. But Marian must accompany me, for I should feel lonesome without her in the company of so many men."

"Of course she will go," replied Harper. "She was included in the proposition."

The girls were highly delighted at the exciting prospect, and at once set about making preparations for their departure.

Ryan and Dan lost no time in purchasing what few supplies were necessary for their trip, and then proceeded to the cabin occupied by the former, in order to get everything in readiness.

"Do you think," observed the detective, at the same time drawing the wet charges from his pistols, as a preparatory measure to cleaning them—"do you think we stand a better chance of catching our man by joining this party of hunters than we should by remaining here? My theory is that Bill Creighton has been in town all winter for no other purpose than with a view of getting points which will serve him for a future raid upon the place."

"Thet's very true," responded Ryan, coolly; "but from what I heerd Esther Harper say, I'm dog-oned sure thet Mister Persimmon is dead gone on her. Now, thet bein' the case, ef we want to ketch the rooster, our best plan is to be jest whar the above named female is, for wharever she goes, ye kin bet your life thet the chap we want will be foun' thar sooner or later."

But surely she is not going on the hunt? Why, the rough life would kill her."

"Kill nothin'! Sycamore Dan, them gals ain't the kind what kills easy. Besides, they hev wanted to go on the buffaler trail fer the past three or four years, but the old man wouldn't hev it. As it is now, however, he is skeered to leave 'em alone, an' he'll be likely to let 'em go with us. To make sure of it, I advised him thet it was his best holt—an' he thinks considerable of what I say."

"It would be a pity if anything should befall them," said Dan. They are so young and so beautiful. By George, those sisters are as handsome as pictures!"

"You bet they be! An' I'm right glad to see thet ye hev got some sense about ye, pard. Them gals git 'way ahead o' anythin' I ever see in the way o' kaliker."

And so the two sat and talked for an hour, working meantime upon their weapons. The remainder of the day was spent in sundry preparations, and they retired early to bed in order that they might be up with the sun next morning.

By four o'clock, just as the day began to break, the whole town was astir. Horses were brought out and saddled, pack-mules were loaded with provisions, blankets, tents, and cooking utensils; and, before the sun was fairly in sight, the long cavalcade

filed out of the main street upon the prairie stretching miles away to the westward.

Their progress was slow and without organization at first; but gradually, as they went ahead, the line assumed more regularity of motion, and with that, of course, a faster gait.

The sisters, fresh and rosy in their pretty brown riding dresses, were the center of attraction to all the men, each of whom seemed determined that no effort should be spared to make the journey pleasant for them. These attentions were very agreeable to Esther and Marian, for where is your young woman who does not enjoy a little of the flattery which such special and marked kindnesses imply.

During the afternoon the sisters became separated. A tall, dark-haired man reined his horse to the side of Marian, and the two fell into conversation. The girl did not like this fellow, and her greeting was not what might be called cordial. He, however, did not seem inclined to resent the rebuff she gave him, but began to talk in a subdued tone, though with a vehement manner.

He was not a remarkably handsome man. He was long and lank, and his face was thin and hatchet-shaped. His yellow, cadaverous skin seemed to fairly cling to his bones, and flesh was as scarce upon his frame as if he had been a boarding-house turkey; and there was a kind of lowering, unreliable glance in his eyes which indicated a fickle and untrustworthy disposition. Marian disliked this man intensely, principally because he seemed determined to pursue her through all time with a passion which she could not and would not reciprocate.

On the morning in question they spoke for some

moments in an undertone, already indicated, and then, unconsciously, their voices grew louder.

"Have I not told you," she said, indignantly, "never to speak to me upon that subject again?"

"Yes. But how can I avoid it, when it is so near my heart?"

"It *must be* avoided. How, I care not."

"But why are you so cold toward me? I have some money, and could provide you with a comfortable home. Then, too, I am not altogether ugly to look at, and, greater than all, I love you! Is not that enough to make you merciful to me?"

The man looked at her with an appealing expression in his eyes. Marian was not hard-hearted, but she thoroughly despised this person, and could scarcely endure his presence, not counting the tenacity with which he urged his repugnant suit upon her. She could not avoid pitying him, because she knew his passion was hopeless. She had the family trait of firmness, and having once fairly made up her mind no mortal power could change her determination.

Turning in her saddle so as to face him squarely, he said, without a quiver in her rich voice:

"Dick Hatfield, I am sorry that you have ever thought of me other than as a friend. I am sorry that love for me has entered your heart. But as it is so, and through no encouragement on my part, I cannot remedy or help the matter. I do not love you. That being the fact, I would not marry you if you were as rich as Crœsus, and as handsome as Apollo. When I say it I mean it, every word, and it is as useless for you to attempt to alter my decision as it would be for you to try and fly to the summit of

yonder mountain. You have heard my decision. Do not wait to hear more."

Hatfield remained silent for a moment. He had been sent away empty-handed before, but never so decidedly as now. He was a man used to having his own way, and he could not sit patiently and brook delay. His heart was in an instant whirling with mad passion. Dark schemes rose there and blackened his whole soul. A glance of vengeful cunning shot from his eyes, boding ill to the young girl by his side, and with a muttered imprecation he put spurs to his horse and rode away.

Marian had seen the ugly look upon his face, but it did not trouble her. She was fully conscious of the right of her position. The blood which flowed in her veins came from stock which knew not the meaning of that little word fear. And while she knew very well what sort of a man Dick Hatfield was, she was far from standing in any awe of him. So she only laughed softly to herself as he left her.

In the meantime Dan, having observed that Esther was riding alone, took the opportunity to become more thoroughly acquainted with her. From what he had learned of the way Persimmon Bill regarded her, and its probable result, he thought it extremely likely that he would soon be thrown into close contact with her. In addition to this motive for seeking her acquaintance, he may have been attracted by other causes.

As he came from behind, she did not see him, for some occult reason, I know not what. Dan at once imagined that her ignorance of his presence was more assumed than real, and so, rather than gratify her evident wish to be surprised by the sound of his voice, he rode along, a little in the rear, in silence.

As he had surmised, she became restive under this novel treatment, and finally, after a little while, adopted new tactics. Allowing her face to turn as she appeared to examine the broad circle of the horizon, her eyes fell suddenly upon him. Starting in her saddle with well simulated surprise, she exclaimed, with affected displeasure:

"Ah! You here?"

Dan looked at her with a glance that was half piercing and half roguish. She could not carry out the deception under that searching examination, and her eyes fell. This was enough for the detective, for it showed him that he had conquered her first attempt to give him a false impression.

"Why, yes," he responded, in answer to her question. "I've been here for the past ten minutes."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, ma'am," he continued, suddenly remembering his dialect. "I didn't know as how thar was any harm in that."

Esther noticed the change, and her eyes went straight to his face. It was Dan's turn to be discomfited now, but he stood her mute inquiry with the fortitude to which a life of danger had inured him.

The girl surveyed him carefully from head to foot before she spoke again. When her eyes had completed that task she said, in a calm, measured voice:

"Let me see. I believe you said yesterday that you were an old partner of Posey Ryan's. When did you separate?"

"Oh, some years ago," responded the detective, with a vague notion that he was being quizzed.

"Where have you been since then?" she continued, without stopping.

"The man who hesitates is lost," thought Dan to himself, and without another instant of reflection he plunged into his old story of trapping on the banks of the Wabash. He did not stop at the assertion either, but gave, with great minuteness, the full details of his work there, and described at length some of the hardships of the life he had led. She heard him through quietly, and at one time, so apparently truthful was his manner, she almost felt tempted to believe him. But when she looked at his soft white hands, and at about the same time he let slip a word or two which did not accord with his assumed character, she became more fully convinced than ever that Sycamore was not what he seemed.

Silence ensued. She was thinking. Who could he be, and why did he seek to hide his name? She had heard often that young men of wealth and refinement in the East, through some indiscretion or crime, were often obliged to leave their homes and fly to the Western country in order to avoid arrest and disgrace. Could Dan be one of these?"

Before she reached this stage in her reflection, Dan had begun to wonder what was employing her mind. He watched her narrowly for a few minutes. Then reining his horse so close to hers that their rough coats touched together, and stooping over a trifle in the saddle, he spoke in a low tone:

"What are you thinking so busily about, Miss Harper?"

There was a strange, soft music in his voice.

She looked up hurriedly, caught her breath as if she was startled, and then replied:

"Do you wish me to be frank?"

"Why, of course I do," he replied.

And he meant every word he said.

"Well, then," she continued, looking him firmly in the eye, "I was wondering who you are, and why you are taking up this rough life on the plains. Doubtless you have some good reason for not telling me the truth about yourself. But before you are found out by some person who is not so lenient as I am, go and get your hands hardened and sunburned. You must also be more careful not to lapse from the dialect you have assumed. You should exhibit greater caution."

For the first time in his life Dan Burdette felt guilty, and for the first time in his life he blushed and looked away. Yet he experienced no sensation of shame. In fact, the feeling he underwent at that moment was considerably out of his line, and he failed to understand it altogether. His tongue, usually so voluble, came near failing him utterly, and it was only after a moment of thought that he managed to stammer out something about "not intending any deceit."

That brought a laugh to Esther's lips.

"Oh, don't bother yourself to explain. I was only warning you for your own good——"

"But I choose to explain," said Dan, resolutely, with some of his own bearing. "You have found me out. Well, I am glad it was you and no one else, for I can trust you to keep the matter secret. You are right. I do not belong to this rough life, nor it to me. I am here with a mission—an important one. I am sorry that I cannot tell you what it is, nor why I have come. Of that you will learn when the object of my presence here is achieved. But I can tell you, without violation of my pledges, that I am thrown among you by nothing that can bring you the slightest harm, and that behind all my assumed charac-

ters there is a man of honor and integrity. When the time comes I shall show you irrefutable evidence that I have spoken the truth."

Dan had spoken with a great deal of force, although very quietly. Esther's eyes and his had not parted during the whole time, and when he finished she held out her hand.

"I believe you are honest this time," she said, seriously; and then, with a laugh, "but you don't talk like a buffalo hunter always."

"I shall be more careful in future," rejoined the detective, pleasantly. "But I may rely upon you to keep my secret?"

"You may rely upon me."

Their hands had remained together for a full minute now, and it was only after just the faintest touch of a pressure that he allowed the little gloved fingers to slip from his own.

It was by this time almost sundown, and the camp was pitched upon the bank of a tiny rivulet, whose basin was shaded with green trees budded into life.

Soon darkness settled about the camp, and the party, after supper, gathered in little knots near the fire to smoke or tell stories. But these amusements did not last very long. A day's travel on the plains, particularly at that season, when the turf is fresh and progress laborious, tires out the strongest men.

Therefore the sentinels were posted early, and the buffalo hunters retired to their blankets.

Dan lay for some hours with his feet to the fire, trying in vain to sleep. It was curious, he reflected, that he should have been discovered by a girl. Alas, he did not know at that time how much finer a

woman's perceptions are than those of a man! But he found it out afterward.

After a time Dan's eyelids drooped slowly together, but shut them ever so tightly he could not close out the image of a fair young face with red cheeks, and black eyes and blue-black hair. It would not be banished.



A SCENE IN CAMP.—(Chap. V.)

Suddenly Dan felt a warm breath on his neck. Then a cold, damp nose was rubbed against his warm skin. He opened his eyes, and met Vixen's two burning coals leveled upon him.

"Confound the beast!" he muttered. "Go away! Get out and let me sleep!"

But Vixen would not get out. She ran off for a few steps, and then, coming back, seized the detective's coat-sleeve in her teeth. Next she began to tug as if trying to drag him away.

At that instant it occurred to Dan that Ryan had said the animal had this way of asking to be followed.

"I wonder what on earth she wants?" he muttered, sitting up.

As he reached this position he saw a movement as if somebody was stealing away in the darkness. Quick as thought he threw himself back upon the blanket and began to watch the retreating form. He understood now what Vixen had wanted him to see.

As soon as the person he was looking after had reached a safe distance Dan rose to his feet and stole stealthily away in pursuit. Moving with caution he was able to keep just in sight, and yet not attract attention. The man, whoever he was, went straight up the course of the creek, as if going to some secret rendezvous.

Dan followed noiselessly, determining that whatever might be the destination of the person he watched, not to be deprived of knowing all about it.

Vixen, who was creeping along in the darkness just ahead of the detective, came to a stand-still. Dan halted also, fancying that his guide had seen the man ahead of them stop.

But the animal turned her eyes toward him, and he could see them glow again like two fiery stars. He knew she had discovered something, and he crept forward carefully to see what it was.

Sycamore Dan was beginning to understand Ryan's pet.

He stooped down over Vixen. She was gazing fixedly at some object lying on the ground. Her feet were planted firmly, her hair bristled toward her head, and she was breathing with a strange, hissing sound.

What could that dark object be stretched upon the prairie? Dan reached forward and touched it. The body of a man!

It was still warm, but fast becoming rigid. The detective passed his hand over the recumbent figure until he touched blood still flowing from a wound. Kneeling closer he examined the face.

He saw that it was one of the sentinels, and that his throat was cut from ear to ear.

CHAPTER VI.

PLOTS.

Dan was horrified. Had he not been used to sights of blood his terrible discovery would have paralyzed him. But his whole life had thrown him among desperate characters and merciless scoundrels with whom murder was little more than an ordinary undertaking. Constant intimacy with this dark side of human nature had hardened his nerves more or less, and had dulled his appreciation of the full horror of revolting crimes.

But in spite of the stern schooling he had undergone he could not forbear to shudder at the cold-blooded atrocity of the murder that had just been brought to his knowledge.

"The villain!" he muttered between his teeth. "He shall be made to pay for this. But I wonder where he has gone. Come, Vixen! lead on, or we shall lose him."

The animal, with an intelligent glance, trotted quietly away, Dan following as rapidly as possible with an eye to noiselessness. The journey was not a long one. Vixen had not traveled far when she came to another halt as sudden as the previous one. The detective, who had given up peering into the darkness, and now trusted to her sagacity to find out the best paths, saw her quick stop, and himself ceased to move with equal celerity.

The time Vixen had chosen could not have been

better planned, for Dan had no sooner come to a stand-still than he heard voices not far ahead.

"Halloa!" he thought; "two of them, eh? We shall have to look into this."

He then stooped over so as to bring his lips close to the ear of Vixen, and whispered the single word "Ryan," accompanying the direction with a gesture which was intended to be a command for her to leave him.

She understood him perfectly. Giving her comical-looking bob-tail a couple of jerks to signify compliance, she started away at a fast trot upon the back track. When the detective was sure she had gone he turned his attention to the more important work around him.

Bending his head he could hear the sound of voices, but found it impossible to understand what was being said. He realized the advisability of learning all that was going on, for he fully believed that some underhand work was in progress. Therefore, without a thought of the danger of his position, he moved silently, but with rapidity, toward the spot from whence the voices emanated.

Sycamore Dan was an adept in the art of gliding about unheard, and this fact was demonstrated by his success in approaching, undiscovered, so close to the men that he could hear every syllable they spoke.

The first words which fell upon his ear caused him to start involuntarily. They were spoken by Dick Hatfield.

"You take my message to the chief. He will know by what you say that the attack must be made soon —before the party is thoroughly organized. You will also tell him that the girls are both with us. Persimmon Bill is not the man to let chances slip."

"You bet yer life," responded the person to whom Hatfield was talking.

If Dan had been interested before, he was excited now. His eyes snapped with hatred, his hands clenched closely, and he became fairly rigid in his attempt to control his excitement. It was strange what an effect was produced by the simple sound of a voice. But the whole matter becomes very simple when we know that the last words were spoken by no other person than Jack Robinson, the man who had helped in the attempt to murder him on the bank of the Smoky.

"You sneaking coward," muttered the detective. "I'll have a chance before long, I hope, to get even with you for that piece of work."

It was only by exercising the utmost restraint that he was able to control his desire to rush out and shoot the men down like dogs where they stood. But fortunately for his plans he reflected that by such a course he might spoil his entire chances. If he kept silent and bided his time he should probably learn the schemes of the robbers before their contemplated attack could be made. This would give the buffalo hunters a great advantage, and might possibly secure him the end he was seeking at the risk of his own life.

Therefore, calling all the vast strength of his will to his help, he repressed his emotion and listened.

All this had been the work of an instant, flashing through his active brain so quickly that he did not miss a line of the conversation.

Robinson went on with what he was saying.

"How soon should the attack be made? Tell me, so that I can post Bill."

"Well, it ought to be within a day or two, because

after that the men in our party will have grown used to each other, and it will be more difficult on that account to defeat them."

"That's a fact. How far do you go in a day?"

"Not more than thirty miles, I should think. Large bodies move slowly, you know."

Just as the plotters reached this stage of their talk, Dan, who was listening so intently that he had become oblivious of all other surroundings, felt something soft rubbing against his ankles. It was Vixen, who had returned. An instant later the huge form of Posey Ryan loomed up in the darkness, and the two partners pressed each other's hand.

Robinson was spaking when Ryan arrived upon the scene.

"Where shall you be to-morrow night at this time?"

"I don't know exactly. Our course is due west, and we shall in all probability have traveled about thirty miles, as I told you."

"Good. If I follow along, can you manage to get out and meet me?"

"I don't know about that. It is not easy to get away from camp. Why, even to-night I was detected as I came up the creek, and in order to avoid questions, I had to kill a man—one of the sentries."

Robinson laughed.

"That's right, my friend. You come out every night, and kill a man as you come. If you do that we can afford to wait a week or two."

"Oh, that's all very well, Jack Robinson," returned Hatfield, in a tone which implied that it was *not* very well, "but I ain't fond of murder."

"What, growing chicken-hearted? I'm ashamed for you."

Dan clutched Ryan's arm. He was becoming very much excited.

"No, I ain't a coward; but killing a man is one thing, and murder's another. They're both bad enough, Heaven knows, but while I have my choice I'd rather take the least of two evils."

"Yas, consarn yer black hide!" muttered Ryan, between his teeth. 'Afore you an' me settles up I'll show ye a game worth two o' that!"

The men now began to get ready for a separation, and the two watchers drew back to allow Hatfield to pass them. Just as he was about to say good-night to his companion a thought that had escaped his memory seemed to return. He stopped, wheeled about, and addressed a question to Robinson.

"Oh, by the way, where is the chief?"

This was the very inquiry Dan wanted to make. If he could learn of Bill Creighton's whereabouts he would not give him time to attack the camp, but would take the initial steps himself.

The partners listened with deep anxiety for the reply. Robinson laughed at the question.

"Bill? Why, ain't you known him long enough to be better posted than to ask such a question? Surely you know that he never tells anybody where he is going. Oh, no. He's too shrewd for that."

"But how will you find him?"

"I sha'n't."

"Well, then, how in thunder are you going to give him my message?"

Dick Hatfield was in no mood for trifling, and the evasive replies of his brother villain roused his ire. Robinson saw at a glance that he had made a mistake.

"I beg pardon, old chap. You musn't get excited over what I say."

"Oh, stow that palaver. If you don't want to quarrel, why don't you answer my questions?" growled Hatfield, in surly tones

"I will, if you give me time. When Bill wants me, he will hunt me up. That's how I am to give him the message."

"All right. Follow us to-morrow, and meet me at night, wherever we may be. I may have important news for you. Good-night."

"Good-night."

The schemers separated, Robinson to mount his horse and ride away, while his companion in crime retraced his steps toward the camp, passing so close to Dan and Ryan that they could have touched him had they chosen.

The detective was disappointed. Just as he had been on the verge of discovering a vital point he was thwarted. He had always known Creighton as a bold and wary foe, and now he realized to its fullest extent the difficulty of the work he had been assigned.

Moody and disheartened, he turned to go back over the same path he had come.

"Wal, pard," said his friend, in a low tone, as they walked slowly along, "what kind of a 'tarnal racket is this?"

"It is a scheme to steal Esther and Marian, I fancy, and at the same time rob the party of whatever they have got. But it *must* fail."

"Of course it must. Ye don't think we chaps is goin' to stan' by an' see our gals carted off, do ye? Fire an brimstun'! It will be a thunderin' bad job for the rooster what tackles it. You hear me?"

"But if they attack us, and prove the stronger, what are we going to do?"

"Why we're goin' to fight until every durned one o' that Bloodsucker outfit is sent whar he b'long—down to the infernal regions. Thet's what we're goin' to do."

"That is good talk, partner, but we must take care not to give them any advantage."

"Ye kin bet yer boots we won't," rejoined Ryan, laconically.

The men had now reached the spot where the murdered sentinel lay upon the ground. Lifting him tenderly in their arms they proceeded as fast as possible to the camp, where they covered the body with a blanket and retired to rest, without awakening any one.

CHAPTER VII.

BLOCKING THE GAME.

The morning dawned dull and gray. Dan and Ryan were up as soon as the first faint streak of light made its appearance. Soon the entire camp was stirring, and the men were getting ready for their day's work. The detective and his partner kept their eyes on Hatfield, who moved from place to place like a man suffering under some vague foreboding of evil. Evidently he had not slept during the night. The murdered sentry had not yet been missed, although the other sentinels were already in camp, awaiting their breakfast.

Ryan watched his opportunity, when several of the hunters were standing about, and then determined on a startling experiment. Standing close to the blanket which hid the face of the dead man, he raised his voice so as to be distinctly heard for some distance in all directions.

"Hatfield!" he called out, in a tone which attracted general attention. "Come over hyar a minnet, won't ye? I've summat to tell ye."

The murderer obeyed the summons mechanically, supposing Ryan's request was *bona fide.* As he came nearer the old scout affected to notice for the first time his haggard appearance.

"Why, hello!" he cried. "Ye couldn't hev slep' well last night, I reckon. Ye look like a corpus!"

Hatfield started as the scout's words fell upon his ear. He detected the hidden meaning in his tone,

and turned a shade paler. But he was in no wise disconcerted, and managed to stammer out a response.

"Well, no. I can't say that I did sleep very well. I was troubled with dreams."

Ryan was silent a moment, as if pondering on the reply. Dan stood close beside his partner, apparently a disinterested spectator, but in reality watching with the keenest of glances the workings of Dick Hatfield's cadaverous face. The scout retained his thoughtful mood only a minute. Then with a slow, drawling voice that was inexpressibly odd, he continued:

"Dreams, hey? Wal, now, I wonder what a man could dream of, to make him look so 'tarnal outer sorts. Fire an' brimstun! I should think nothin' shorter'n a reg'lar night-hoss could hev sich a effeck —say the dream o' a *murder!*"

Again a change passed over the repulsive visage of the assassin. He cast one sharp glance into the face of his tormentor, but the outlines were as rigid as marble, and he could as easily have penetrated a mask. It was only a coincidence, he thought, but he was impatient at the chaffing he was subjected to.

"Is this all you have called me for?" he asked, with some asperity in his tones.

Ryan suddenly became very serious. The smile died out of his expression instantaneously, and was replaced by a look of unpitying sternness.

"No, Mister Hatfield," he said, slowly and with great distinctness. "Thet war not quite all. I b'leve ez how I said I wanted to show ye summat. Pardner," he continued, addressing Dan, "won't ye be kind enough to h'ist thet blanket?".

The detective's motion was as sudden and quick as

had been the request of his friend. With a dextrous wave of his hand he removed the covering, so that the body was exposed to view.

Quite a large party of the hunters, attracted by the voices, had been drawn to the spot, and now stood horror-struck, gazing at the sight presented to them.

As soon as Hatfield saw the bloody corpse he uttered a hoarse cry, and staggered back a step or two, as if he had been struck a heavy blow. The sickly hue of his face was rendered more hideous by a dull gray pallor, and his eyes seemed fairly to start from their sockets. His jaw dropped, his teeth chattered, and his limbs shook beneath his weight. He could not speak, but only gasped for breath.

Dan and Ryan did not lose an item in his manifestations of guilt, which had become apparent to everybody around. Hatfield made several strong efforts to check the great emotion which shook his frame, and after some moments he so far succeeded as to be able to exclaim, in a kind of gurgling voice:

"I didn't do it—I didn't do it!"

That caused Ryan to laugh, for he saw how completely entrapped the sneaking scoundrel was.

"O, ye didn't, hey? Fire an' brimstun! who sed ye did? Now look hyar, Mister Dick Hatfield, ye're a liar, an' ye know it! This hyar murder was done by your hand. Deny it ef ye kin! When ye waltzed outen this camp las' night ye was follered. D'ye understan'?—follered. An' more'n thet, every word ye exchanged with thet cuss, Jack Robinson, was heerd by my pardner an' me. The proof is too strong agin ye, my boy—fire an' brimstun, but it is!"

During this time Hatfield was recovering himself. He knew in an instant that he was caught, and he

could see that the evidence of Ryan and Dan would fall against him. He reflected that he was far from being a favorite with the hunters, and it needed no second thought to tell him that they would not believe a word he might say. There seemed to be but one chance for liberty—that was to make a straight dash to where his horse was tethered, mount, and fly. It was a desperate thought, but nothing short of desperation could save him. He knew it, and resolved to make the attempt.

With a loud curse, and an almost inconceivably quick movement, he bounded toward Ryan, drawing his bowie as he came. But, agile and muscular as he was, he had made a late start, for the ever-watchful eyes of the detective had divined his purpose as soon as it had been formed.

Sycamore Dan was nothing if not quick, and his motions, though few, were as rapid as a flash of lightning. Dick Hatfield had not taken two steps when the detective's long right arm straightened out with the swiftness of a bolt from the cross-bow, and his bony knuckles caught the fugitive squarely between the eyes.

The sound of that terrific blow was sickening. It was like the dull thud of a huge club in the hands of a strong man falling upon the ribs of some poor beast of burden. The blow would have felled an ox. As it was, Hatfield was fairly lifted from the ground, and then fell a senseless mass of flesh at the feet of the surrounding crowd.

The stunning effect of the stroke was so thorough that, after an instant of tremulous quivering, the body stiffened out as rigid as death.

"Fire and brimstun!" exclaimed Ryan, "how did ye do thet? Why, Go-lier hisself couldn't hev hit

out like ye did then. Spooks an' tarantalers, but I b'lieve he's dead."

"Oh, no, he isn't," responded Dan, coolly. Then remembering his dialect, he continued:

"He'll git over it afore long. Jest put his head to soak, an' lay him one side fer awhile."

"Great snakes!" rejoined Ryan. "Why, I'd ez lief be struck by a yearthquake ez to hev a tap o' thet kind. W-h-e-w!" and he ended his comment by a long-drawn whistle, which was half indicative of surprise and half of admiration.

It was a sad morning in camp. Hunters, as a rule, like every class of men made up for the most part of low or bigoted natures, are given to superstitions. They believe that if a hunting trip begins with success, it will be attended by the same thing all the way through; and they also imagine that if the first day or two is darkened by ill fortune, they will not meet with good luck during the entire trip. The hunters we have accompanied thus far looked upon the death of their companion as a common misfortune, which would have an equal effect on all of them.

The murder was to them an infallible omen of disaster. It told them, through their superstitious fancy that before they should again return to Fort Hays and their families, there would be more bloodshed and greater loss of life. They were gloomy and abstracted all day.

But it is only just to them to say that the quiet and darkness which fell upon the camp was not caused by this selfish thought alone. The men sincerely mourned the loss of their companion, who had been a brave and daring hunter. They felt keen and unspeakable sorrow that he had met such an untimely fate.

Just after sunrise, an hour later than the murder had been made known, the body was deposited in a new-made grave, with the homely services at the command of the hunters.

The party, then, with heavy hearts, prepared to resume their journey.

Hatfield had not yet returned to consciousness, and it was an open question whether he ever would. They knew he was not dead, because there was an almost imperceptible pulsation over the place where his heart ought to have been, if he had possessed such a commodity, which I doubt.

It was some time before they could decide what to do with him. Some wanted to go on and leave him lying on the prairie. Others desired to wait until he should regain his senses, and then try him for the murder, and hang him. One or two of the sterner members of the company advocated blowing out his brains and leaving him to furnish food for the wolves and vultures.

But the majority would hear of no such work. They said it was too much like the crime with which he himself had been charged. That would not be justice, even though he did richly deserve death. It would be murder. They were still perplexed about the question, when Ryan, after consulting a few moments with Sycamore Dan, came to the rescue. Said he:

"Peeraps, feller-citizens, seein' as how me an' my pardner hez rooted out this game, so far, ye'll 'low me to make a sijjeschun."

That was just what they wanted, and they signified their compliance with his wish at once.

"Wal," he continued, "I propose thet we cart him 'long till to-night, anyhow. Ef he's a-goin' to come

to hisself at all, he'll do it afore then. An' ef he's a-goin' to hand in his chips, he'll do thet, likewise. Purvidin' he lives, we kin organize court an' try him then. Thet's my sijjeschun, an' my pardner sez he's agreeable."

The company were not backward in seeing the force of Ryan's proposal, and acceded to it without a dissenting voice. A hammock was slung between two horses, and the limp carcass of Dick Hatfield was placed in it. After that the cavalcade proceeded on its way.

Dan and Ryan rode along slowly behind the litter containing the murderer in silence. Each was bound up in his own thoughts. They rode thus for an hour, and were only aroused from their reveries by a faint moan from the man they were both thinking about.

"Hello!" exclaimed Ryan; "he's comin' to hisself agin. Blessed ef I thought he'd ever git over thet lick ye give him onto his snoot."

They rode up beside the improvised couch. Hatfield had opened his eyes, and was looking about him in a half-dazed way, as if his mind were completely at sea. But the moment his glance once fell upon the faces of the two men peering at him, the scene of the morning flashed across his mind, and he glared at them like a wild beast. If his hands had not been pinioned he would have attempted again to escape, weak as he was. But he was firmly bound, and so could only lie still and gnash his long teeth with rage.

His captors were not the men to crow over a fallen enemy under any circumstances, and they drew back so as to avoid even the appearance of exultation. A new thought struck Dan. How strange he had not dreamed of it before.

"Posey!" he exclaimed, with sudden vehemence.

"Whoa!" responded Ryan, tugging at the bit of his horse, which had taken fright at Dan's ejaculation and the gesture which accompanied it. The animal pranced about for several minutes before it could be induced to approach again the man who had startled it.

"Fire an' brimstun! D'ye want to git my 'tarnal neck broke? 'Cos ef ye do, jest holler agin like that."

Dan was convulsed by his friend's comical attempts to check his fiery steed, and as soon as he could recover his gravity, he proceeded to unfold the plan which had just dawned upon him.

"Why not lay a trap for Robinson to-night? Have you thought of it?"

"Thet's jest whar I war thinkin' of when ye belched out an' skeered my nag. I think it's a good idee. Kin ye imitate voices?"

"How do you mean?"

"Why, kin ye make yer voice soun' like it came from some other feller?"

"Oh, you mean can I ventriloquize."

Ryan swung round in his saddle so suddenly that he came very near unseating himself, and then gazed fixedly but doubtingly at his companion.

"Is it so bad az thet, old man?" he asked, in vague wonder.

"What do you mean?" questioned Dan.

"Look a-hyar old pard," continued the hunter, with extreme gravity, 'ef I ever do anythin' what's mean or crooked, jest fire thet word at me agin. But ez long ez I'm a squar', decent sort of a chap, don't ye chaw no more dicshunaries 'round whar I

am. Spooks an' catamounts! but ye liked to a took away my breath."

"Did I?" was Dan's innocent rejoinder, although the struggle to keep his face straight was a difficult one.

"Yas, ye did, an' don't ye do it agin. Wal, what I was agoin' to say was, d'ye s'pose, ef ye was in the dark, ye could imitate the voice of Dick Hatfield so's to git thet Robinson chap up clost whar we could grab him?"

"I can try, anyhow," responded the detective, with an air which implied some confidence in his own powers. "We will make the attempt, anyhow."

The subject was dropped then, and the partners separated. During the afternoon Dan found time for a little conversation with Esther. She received him graciously, and listened with interest to his account of the manner in which he had tracked Hatfield on the previous night. The detective thought it best, however, to refrain from telling her that the attack of the Bloodsuckers was to be made for the purpose of carrying away herself and her sisters. The announcement might cause her useless anxiety, and, in any event, could be productive of no essential good. He passed a very pleasant hour in her company, but was not so thoroughly absorbed as to be unable to discern that Ryan and Marian Harper were in close and eager conversation by themselves.

The party halted a trifle earlier than usual that afternoon, for the second day of a journey is always the most wearisome, and the horses were utterly fagged out. After supper the sentinels were posted, and an extra guard was thrown out, to remove any anxiety which might be felt by the more timid mem-

bers of the company concerning the possibilities of an attack.

The spot chosen was not far from the edge of a clump of trees. Dan and Ryan, at their own request, were selected to guard the camp on that side, and took their rifles in hand for the purpose of assuming their duties shortly after dark.

"Why did you pick out this place?" asked the detective, as they walked toward the grove.

"Wal, cos ef Robinson comes to-night, he'll be purty derned likely to waltz in from this direction."

"Why so?"

"This mess o' trees will hide him from bein' seen by the people in camp. Anybody who hed ever been on the border orto know thet."

They had soon concealed themselves in the underbrush, and settled down to await the coming of events.

Vixen lay upon the ground between them, regarding first one and then the other with her great lustrous eyes, and emitting a sound which resembled the purr of a cat. She had taken a great liking to Dan, and apparently looked upon him as a kind of second master.

"Does she often take fancies to people, as she has to me?" he questioned, stroking her head gently.

"No. In fack, it's doggoned few people she'll hev anythin' to do with. But she's got *me* down so fine thet whenever she sees me along of anybody, an' kinder takin' a hitch to 'em, it's all she wants in order to foller my example. She's a mighty knowing beast, is Vixen, an' ef she could only talk United States, she'd be better nor human."

Ryan's pet seemed to appreciate his compliment, for she turned her head so as to regard him more

fully. The scout noticed the movement, and smiled. Then patting her head he continued:

"But ef she can't talk she understans evrythin' that's sed to her jest ez well ez if she was a native. She an' I hez ben pardners onto the border for purty nigh six year, now, an' we sticks to each other jist ez pardners orto. Don't we, my gal?"

Vixen rose from her recumbent position and climbed upon Ryan's chest reaching forward so as to lick his face.

Dan was deeply affected by the evident warm feeling which existed between them. He was on the point of passing some comment when the strange pet pricked up her ears as if a sound had fallen upon her hearing. She sprang lightly from her perch on her master's breast, and ran up the trunk of a partly fallen tree lying near by.

Throwing back her head, she sniffed the air as if her keen scent had detected some strange property in the atmosphere.

"Wal, Vixen," said Ryan, in a low tone, "what is it ye smell?"

The animal trotted back to his feet, and uttered a low and ominous growl.

"What does she mean?" asked the detective.

"She means thet our man is comin'."

"How can you divine her thoughts?"

"Wal, I reckon it's a kind of instink. It ain't very often thet I make a mistake, though."

Then turning to Vixen, he added:

"Who is it, gal? Is it Robinson?"

The ominous growl was repeated.

"Thar!" exclaimed Ryan, in tones of triumph. "Didn,'t I tell ye so?"

The men were already prepared for action, and so only waited for the approach of their prey.

By listening intently they were soon able to discern the footfalls of a horse, coming nearer and nearer, with a long, loping stride. Then the noise ceased for a moment.

"Heavens! He has taken fright," ejaculated Dan, in dismay.

As he spoke the wild and mournful cry of a panther was borne upon the wind.

"Nary fright, old hoss," responded Ryan. "He's only signalin'—that's all."

The scout was an excellent imitator of all wild animals, and the reverberations of Robinson's voice had scarcely died away when he uttered a similar noise.

Then the sound of the horse's hoofs were heard again for a few moments, but moving slower and with more caution than before. In a short time they ceased, and the quick, short bark of the prairie-dog followed the halt.

"He's feelin' his way," observed Ryan, significantly, at the same time repeating the sound. Shortly afterward the watchers were able to hear the approaching horse's every step, and when the third halt came they could make out the dim outlines of beast and rider in the darkness.

"Dick Hatfield!" were the words, spoken in low but distinct tones. "Are you there?"

"I am," responded Dan, in a voice which was a tolerably fair imitation of the man who was lying bound and gagged in camp.

"Come nearer," he continued; "the coast is clear."

Robinson urged his horse forward within a few paces of the detective. But the night was so black

that he could scarcely have discovered the identity of the man he was talking with, even if he had been brought face to face with him.

"I saw the chief to-day," he began. "The attack is arranged for to-night."

In the alarm caused by this sudden announcement, Dan came very near betraying himself; but by a strong effort he checked the words which were on his lips, and said:

"Good enough! At what time will they be here?"

"About two o'clock. You will be ready for them, of course?"

"Yes, I will," responded the detective, emphatically, forgetting for a moment his assumed character.

The change in his voice was noticed at once by Robinson, who started in his saddle, and gathered up the reins of his horse.

"Duped, by Heaven!" he exclaimed. "But whoever you are, you shall never live to tell the tale."

And quick as thought his hand flew to the holster in which he carried his revolver.

His motion was rapid, but fruitless; for during the foregoing conversation Ryan had crept noiselessly around to the opposite side of his horse. At the first movement toward the pistol he rose from the grass, bounded into the air, caught the villain around the neck with both hands, and dragged him to the ground in an instant.

With his sinewy fingers firmly clutched in Robinson's throat, and his knee upon his chest, Ryan spoke between his teeth, with terrible earnestness:

"Make one sound, give one yelp, an' I'll wring yer neck like I'd choke a chicken. D'ye hear?"

Gasping for breath, Robinson managed to gurgle out an affirmative response.

By this time Dan had prepared some heavy thongs of buckskin, with which he bound the robber securely. That duty performed, Ryan removed his hands from his throat, in order not to suffocate him.

The two partners stood side by side, waiting in stern silence for their victim to recover his breath. After some difficulty he succeeded to such an extent that he was able to speak a few words. The first sentence he uttered was this:

"Who are you fellows, anyhow?"

"Oh, ye'll fin' thet out soon enough," responded Ryan, dryly.

"But I'd like to know now."

The detective took a match from his pocket, and struck it on a stone. As the bright blaze shone full in his face he exclaimed:

"Look, then, and see!"

The robber uttered a groan of dismay and terror. His whole frame shook like an aspen leaf and he was fairly convulsed with fear. Quavering and broken was his voice as he blurted out:

"Sycamore Dan!—or—or—his ghost!"

"Oho, my fine, blooming rose! So you do know me, hey? Well, young man, how do you like it?"

Robinson was silent. He was agitated to such an extent that he could not speak.

"Wal," said Ryan, "thar ain't no use in hangin' round hyar. It's nigh onto midnight now, an' ez Mister Jack Robinson hez been kind enough to sijjest it, we must git ready to receive our frens when they come. So let's trot over to camp."

Not very gently they lifted their captive, and started toward the spot where the hunters were

quietly reposing. Dan was carrying Robinson's feet, while Ryan upheld the other end. Accidentally, or by design, the scout dropped his burden, and the robber's head came in violent contact with the ground.

"I axes yer parding," said Ryan, with mock solemnity. "Did it hurt ye?"

Robinson replied with a terrible anathema, accusing the scout with having allowed him to fall on purpose.

"My darlin'," continued the hunter, in an apologetic tone, as he picked up the robber by the hair of his head, "I wouldn't hurt ye for the world. Don't ye know how much I love ye? Go ahead, Dan."

In five minutes they had arrived at their destination, and in ten the whole camp was aroused and preparing to greet the Bloodsuckers as soon as they should arrive.

Robinson and Hatfield were tossed side by side upon the ground, and employed the time in abusing each other for having "bungled the job," as they phrased it.

Then the camp relapsed into silence, the men lying upon their arms, waiting for the time of action, while the girls sat together in their tent, anxious, yet hopeful.

The time sped by rapidly. At two o'clock, sharp, the sound of many horses was heard, their hoofs clattering loudly upon the frozen earth. Nearer and nearer they came, and the hunters rose upon their knees, clutching their rifles firmly to resist the attack. Suddenly, the sounds ceased. The Bloodsuckers had stopped.

"They're gittin' ready to charge," said Ryan, calmly. "Stand solid, boys, an' kill every derned

black-hearted thief ye kin draw a bead on. Ah! here they come!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEFEAT.

As the attacking party approached, the thump, thump, thump of their horses' feet sounded like the approach of a cavalry regiment.

To the men lying there awaiting the onslaught, it seemed like an age of weary, anxious waiting. With guns to their shoulders and ready cocked the defensive hunters watched for the instant when their foes should have approached so close that every shot would have its effect. Their scheme was to allow the robbers to come almost fairly upon them before they opened fire, thus taking their enemies completely by surprise, as they in turn had hoped to take them.

Louder and louder sounded the hoof-strokes upon the hard ground, as the robbers came first within rifle range, then closer, until they could have been picked off with pistol balls, and finally so near that a stone thrown from the hand would easily have reached them. By this time every hunter was half erect, resting upon one knee, and glancing along the shining barrel of his tried and trusty gun.

Every nerve was strained to its utmost tension; every finger was ready to press the spring which would send a leaden messenger of death upon their mission. Why did not Ryan give the signal?

Not a man in the party but asked the question mentally, half in impatience. The Bloodsuckers drew nearer and nearer, and yet there was no sign

from the captain of the hunters. What did it mean?

The oncoming horses were almost upon the men lying in wait. Heavens! it would be too late in another instant. Ah! at last it came, clear and calm through the crisp air, spoken like an ordinary, commonplace word upon an every-day occasion of quiet and peace.

"Fire!"

A blinding flash of flame, running along the entire front; a sound like the simultaneous crack of a hundred whips; a wild yell of dismay on one hand, followed by stirring, triumphant cheers on the other; and then cheers, curses, yells, and oaths commingled with the sounds of clashing arms, the painful cries of wounded horses, and the bitter groans of mutilated and dying men.

The black night was livid with the bright streaks of discharging fire-arms, and bullets whizzed through the air in every conceivable direction.

The solid front of the robber force shuddered, wavered, and drew back.

"Hooroar boys!" yelled Ryan, urging his men to renewed efforts. "They're beat! Up, an' at 'em agin afore they kin git over the dose we've given 'em!"

But he had miscalculated the nature of the foe with whom he had to contend. The repulse only redoubled their fury. Although they had never been met by such a determined resistance, they had been so often in battles which required perseverance and desperate fighting, that their organization was complete.

The hunters labored under circumstances that were quite the reverse. All winter they had been separate, undrilled, and idle. They had not yet

grown used to each other, and were thus unfitted for general and serious fighting, although against the rambling bands of hostile savages who roam the plains, they would undoubtedly have proved very easily victorious. But they had not been used to working under any one particular chief, whose habits they had learned and in whom they had by long association acquired confidence. Their disadvantages, on the whole, were very great.

It took the captain of the Bloodsuckers but an instant to reorganize his men. He knew that it would never do to allow them to be defeated, because such a fact would demoralize them for future action.

So, with a terrible oath, Bill Creighton rode to the head of his company and gave the order to charge again. Then, with a revolver in each hand, and the whole pack in full cry at his heels, he started forward at an impetuous gallop which nothing could withstand.

The fight was desperate and bitter, but it could not last long. The hunters contested every inch of ground, like true men; but they were battling against a foe which their number could not overcome—they could only check its progress.

Dan was very quick to see the condition of affairs, and the utter hopelessness of the cause of his friends. His thoughts reverted at once to the helpless girls, waiting in their tent for the result of the fight, and not dreaming that it would end in disaster for them. Already the tide of battle was working toward the spot where they sat. He could tell that by the sounds of fire-arms falling upon his ears.

Until this time he had fought with but one object, the defeat of Bill Creighton. But, as the thought flashed upon him that Marian and Esther were in

immediate danger, a new purpose took possession of him, and added fresh vigor to his powerful arm.

He became almost frenzied by his desire to reach the place where they were left alone and unprotected. If they should be captured by the fiendish ruffian who commanded the Bloodsuckers—he shuddered at the thought—their fate, he knew full well, would be beyond the power of words to describe. It would be a hundred times worse than the bitterest death.

Sycamore Dan had never realized until now what a precious boon is woman. She had always occupied in his mind a secondary position. But, as he pictured to himself those beautiful girls, full of the freshness and innocence, and loveliness of youth—as he thought of the fearful position in which they were placed, he became nearly crazed with a desire to be where he could protect them, until the last, from the great peril which surrounded them on every hand. He *must* save them.

Nerved and strengthened by his noble determination, he fought with the fury of a tiger. With his heavy bowie-knife he made long sweeps which opened a space before him as he went. Eleven times did his hand come down with the velocity of lightning, and eleven of the Bloodsuckers writhed upon the ground in the agony of mortal wounds.

He was like one of the seven furies let loose from bondage. His eyes blazed with the great anger of battle, and his long, lithe form, towering above those around him, pressed forward toward the goal he sought, with a determination which would have stricken terror to the hearts of the bravest foe.

At last, bleeding from many wounds, but with

rigid determination stamped on every feature, he found himself at the door of the tent.

Tearing away the light covering, he shouted, at the top of his voice.

"Esther! Marian! Fly for your lives!"

No answer.

Stooping, he peered through the darkness, but could not hear a sound within the narrow inclosure. He walked forward, and passed his hands hurriedly over the blankets. They were still warm from recent occupation, but the tent was empty.

"Great Heaven!" he cried, in despair. "They have fallen into the hands of Persimmon Bill! They are lost—lost!"

His face was white with consternation, and his arms nervelessly dropped to his sides, as he thought of the imminent, perhaps fatal, danger to which the beautiful daughters of old Doc Harper were thus exposed.

* * * * * * *

Ryan, who from the time when the first rifle was discharged, seemed to be in the element for which he was born, discovered that the battle was a losing investment at about the same time as that fact dawned upon the active brain of his friend and partner, Sycamore Dan.

But he was in no wise disconcerted by the discovery. It was sufficient for him that a battle was going on. The more desperate it grew, the greater was his content. Posey Ryan would rather fight than do almost anything else he could think of, and so he struck out against the tide which was sweeping away his companions with a calm smile of happiness in his face and great throbs of satisfaction in his heart.

"It's your turn now, doggone ye!" he muttered, with a grin, as with the butt of his rifle he smashed to atoms the skull of a man who had thrust a revolver into his face; "but the time hez got to come, my fine chaps, when old man Ryan will hev the best o' the argyment. An' when thet time does come," he continued, fairly severing a Bloodsucker's head from his body by a long sweep of his knife, "ye kin bet I'll make it tarnal lively for ye."

Then for a few moments he was too busy to do much thinking. Three or four of the robbers attacked him at once, and he was obliged to keep every energy upon the *qui vive* in order to avoid being killed. But his opponents could not have known the man they were fighting with, else they would have chosen some other foeman not so formidable.

With one hand he threw his bowie so terribly straight, and with such fearful accuracy, that the long blade was buried to the hilt in the throat of the man nearest him. Then clubbing his heavy rifle, he struck out with such strength and rapidity that in less time than it takes me to put the fact on paper he had felled the last of the party which attacked him.

Thus he was left for a moment alone in the midst of a cleared space.

"Great snakes!" he exclaimed, "them two fellers we captoored yisterday will git away ez sure ez eggs is eggs, ef we are licked so bad ez I think we shall be. But I reckon, seein' ez how my time's unockkpyed jest now, thet I'll go an' put them roosters outen ther misery."

Seizing his knife again he ran rapidly over to the spot where Hatfield and Robinson had been left bound hand and foot.

When he had approached close enough to discern objects, he was somewhat astonished to observe that only one of the prisoners was still lying where both had been placed. Stooping over, he saw that it was Robinson, who was writhing about in his excitement, tearing up huge mouthfuls of grass. He was in a wild state of frenzy.

Ryan looked at him a moment in perfect satisfaction that the villain should be having such justly deserved agony.

But where was Hatfield? Bending down and catching Robinson firmly by the collar, he jerked him upon his back, and asked:

"Whar's yer pardner?"

"Gone, blast him!" replied the man, in angry tones. "He got away an hour ago, and left me here. But I'll get even with him one of these days!"

At this point Robinson broke into a series of the worst curses it is possible to imagine. He was almost insane with resentment at the action of his former friend.

"Shet up, dern ye!" ejaculated Ryan, in a voice which indicated that disobedience would not be healthy.

The victim obeyed with celerity.

Ryan thought an instant before he spoke again. Then he seemed to have made up his mind to the performance of some new scheme. Turning to Robinson, he said:

"Would ye like very much to git even with Mister Hatfield for the little game he's served ye with?"

Robinson sat bolt upright.

"Would I? Why, I would wade to my neck in melted lead to repay the trick! I would——"

"Never mind what ye'd do. I kem hyar fer the purpose o' cuttin' yer throat from ear to ear, an' I'd a-done it, too, ef yer pardner hed ben hyar to share my 'tenshuns with ye. But ez it is, I hev thought o' givin' ye 'nother shake fer yer life. Will ye agree to what I axes of yer?"

"Agree? I'll agree to anything!"

"Don't be so fast, young feller," observed Ryan, smiling calmly. "What I'm agoin' to ax ye is this: Ef I turn ye loose, will ye help us to git the twist onto yer chief? Will ye do this fer the sake o' scoopin' in Dick Hatfield?"

"Do it? I will—well, just try me."

"I'll do it, Jack Robinson, bad ez ye are. But mind ye," continued the scout, as he cut the bonds of his prisoner, "ef I ketch ye doin' one single, 'tarnal thing what's crooked, I'll bore ye fuller o' holes nor the top o' a pepper-box."

Robinson vouchsafed no response, but as soon as he was released Ryan handed him a gun, and the two started at a rapid, swinging pace away from the spot where death was holding high carnival.

CHAPTER IX.

ESTHER AND VIXEN.

Esther Harper and her sister Marian sat in the tent during the greater part of the battle which raged furiously without.

As the sounds of the fierce conflict advanced or receded, indicating thus the temporary success of one party or another, the hearts of these two girls, sitting wrapped in each other's arms, bounded with exultation or shrank with fear. Every nerve and every sinew in their delicate organisms were strained to their utmost tension, as they strove to discern by the noises outside which way the tide of battle was turning.

Silent, absorbed, bound so closely in each other's embrace that each could detect the heart of her sister, beating tumultuously as the hot blood rushed through their veins, they sat as motionless as statues. The strain upon their systems was continous and intense.

They sat thus for a time, which, though short in reality, seemed in their vivid imaginations to stretch away into an endless eternity of miserable suspense.

But after a while, when the waves of battle had come forward and receded many times, they could tell beyond all doubt that at last the struggle was approaching in the direction of the spot occupied by them. There was no room for denying that the hunters were being beaten, step by step, yielding every succeeding inch of ground only after the most

desperate struggle to retain it. The din and clash of arms told plainer than words that the fight was determined and plucky, but the men were losing steadily.

As the storm came nearer and nearer, the girls unconsciously rose to their feet, still standing with their arms entwining each other in a fond embrace. Their faces were pale, but not with fear. They did not quail or shrink.

"Dear sister," said Esther, quietly, "our position now is a dangerous one. A flying, random bullet may at any moment come tearing through this frail covering and strike one or both of us to the earth."

"I am not afraid, darling Esther," responded the younger, with evidences of undaunted courage. "We will put our trust in Heaven, and if God has so decreed it, we will die together. But for ourselves I have no fear. My heart goes out in anxiety for the lives of those who are fighting so bravely for us. Let us hope that no harm shall come to them."

"Yes. Our father is among that brave band. Pray Heaven he may escape unhurt."

"That I do. But I will not be selfish in my wishes. There are others—many of them—who are, in my mind, equally entitled to our prayers. They are, indeed, brave and generous men to risk their lives for us."

"True, sister, true. Let us go down on our knees and beg our Father in heaven to watch over and protect them. Surely He will listen to our voices at such a time as this."

And there in the murky darkness, alone with their God, who rules the battles, the winds, and the floods, those two virgin hearts were lifted up in earnest supplication. Long and tearfully the innocent girls

pleaded, without one thought of their own danger, and without a single reference to the trying situation in which they themselves were placed.

Their souls were too great to be hampered by selfish motives, and too trustful of the goodness and eternal wisdom of Him to whom they prayed, to imagine for one moment that He would forsake them in any pass, however trying.

They were two noble, large-hearted girls, well worthy the emulation of others, the world over. Their supplication ended, they arose just in time to meet their father, face to face, as with hair streaming in the wind, and the blood trickling from a long and jagged wound upon his forehead, he brushed the door of the tent hastily aside and entered. The hard lines in his face, the stern, cold glitter of his eyes, told that the fight was lost.

"Oh, father," cried Esther, "you are wounded."

"It is nothing," responded the old man, hurriedly. "We must fly from here, and at once."

"Then all is lost! Is there no hope?"

"Of whipping these fiends, no! Of escape, yes. There is hope of freedom, if we lose no time. Follow me on the instant."

The girls needed no second bidding, but passed after their father out into the turmoil and rage of battle without an instant of hesitation.

Old Doc Harper, though bleeding from a number of wounds upon his person, fought with desperate energy. His sturdy efforts would have done credit to a man not one-third of his ripe old age. Totally unmindful of his rapidly passing years, and forgetting in the excitement of the moment that his strength was not equal to the strain it would easily have sustained twenty years ago, he undertook the

trying task of cutting the way for himself and children. But the Bloodsuckers closed in around him rapidly, and he was soon surrounded by ten or a dozen men, against whom his efforts were hopeless.

In the encounter which followed the girls were separated, Marian clinging closely to her father, while Esther was thrust rudely to one side by the ruffians, who were, however, too intent upon their task of overcoming her father to notice who she was.

For an instant after she had been torn from those she loved she remained irresolute. Then a vague, indefinite fear took possession of her, and before she could question the motive which urged her on, she turned and fled.

Heedless of many falls and bruises, and moved by an impulse which she strove in vain to check,she flew along over the ground with rapidity. She knew that she was not doing right to leave her parent and sister alone in the hands of the murdering band, but she could no more have stopped in her wild flight than she could have moved the world from its course. The irresistible law of self-preservation guided her steps, and would not be gainsaid. It was a struggle of nature against will, and for the time being the former was triumphant.

Half unconscious, yet actuated by the dim terror which had seized her and nerved her on, she sped over the ground with renewed rapidity. The sounds of the battle grew fainter and fainter in the far distance, and still Esther plunged ahead, now tripping over some obstacle and falling heavily to the ground, then springing again to her feet, and dashing away at the top of her speed.

For an hour her pace did not slacken or her strength abate. But the exertion was so violent that

sooner or later she must have succumbed. It was an unequal contest, and although she struggled on with pluck and energy, her overtaxed system at last gave way under the strain. She had been strong through many trials and much hardship; but when her power began to fade under the load she had taken upon herself, it departed with extreme suddenness.

Almost before she could realize that she was fatigued, she found herself overcome by a feeling of drowsy faintness. Determined efforts she made to shake off the new and unwelcome sensation, but they were all to no purpose, for each succeeding moment found her weaker than before. Her limbs tottered under her, and her feet became as heavy as lead. A dull lethargy settled upon her whole being like a black pall of night. With sublime courage she struggled to rouse herself and call back her departed energy, but the attempt was only successful for a moment. She staggered forward a few paces farther, and then the great weakness overcame her beyond the power of resistance. Deep and impenetrable gloom settled over her vision; a low rumbling noise sounded in her ears; the strength in her limbs went out; and with a scarcely perceptible groan she sank upon the ground at the foot of a huge tree.

She had fainted from exhaustion.

Through the following hours of that long night she remained helpless and unconscious, lying in the bed of soft, fragrant mosses where she had fallen. The warm sun, bathing the world with liquid glory, looked upon her, lying breathless and apparently powerless, and the wide-spreading branches of the old forest monarch held over her like a protecting canopy.

And the sun took pity upon her. He cast his warmest rays upon her cold and motionless form, encircling her in an embrace that would have wooed a marble statue into life. He surrounded her with his loving arms; he bathed her damp temples with stimulating nectar; he passed his tender fingers through her ebony locks and drew the stagnant blood from her heart into the veins and arteries of her body and limbs. His touch was lighter than that of a nurse, warmer than the pressure of a lover. He breathed into her nostrils, and her chest expanded tremulously. He kissed her lips, and they parted in a gentle smile.

She was coming back to life.

Her eyelids trembled lightly for an instant, and then opened slowly and listlessly. A faint, unsteady sigh escaped her lips. Gradually a consciousness of what had passed came back to her. She remembered that she had been overcome by fatigue, and had fallen upon the softly tufted bed of moss which surrounded her.

But it did not occur to her that she had fainted. That was something to which she had never become used, even in the remotest way. She scarcely knew the meaning of the word. To strong natures like hers the possibility of being overcome by fatigue, to such an extent as to lose consciousness, never presents itself. She imagined that she had merely been asleep.

She saw at a glance that it was long past her usual hour for rising.

"I must have overslept," she murmured to herself. "I will get up at once, and make the best of my way back to Fort Hays."

She attempted to rise. It was a failure, for she

could not move hand or foot. There was a strange sensation around her. It was like some strong internal cord holding her muscles in its power. Again she tried to sit up. It was impossible for her to move.

The strange feeling about her heart increased, and grew stronger and more powerful every instant. It was a vague yet subtle bond, which held her as firmly as a chain. She knew not how to explain the strange dullness which seemed to be growing upon her. In fact the imprisonment was rather agreeable than otherwise. She seemed to yield gradually to the new influence. A delicious languor began to envelop her senses. It was a calm, delightful feeling of repose. As the sense of fascination grew upon her, she felt attracted toward a given point. Her eyes wandered mechanically whither the subtle charm drew them, and she was utterly powerless to change their course.

Indeed there seemed to be no reason why she should strive to avoid the spell which guided her vision. Surely there was no harm in basking in the mellow sunlight, and giving way to the sweet restfulness which encompassed her. Slowly her eyes were drawn toward that single spot. She could not avoid the inclination to look straight down into her lap. As her vision rested upon that one particular point she became convulsed with horror.

Her eyes dilated, and glared with an agony of fear and repulsion. All the pleasant qualities of her lethargy departed in the smallest fragment of a second. In their place remained a terrible sensation of dread. But horror-struck and terrified as she was the strength did not come back to her limbs, and her sinews still refused to do their office.

She would have given ten years of her life, then and there, to have possessed the power which could break the charm that bound her. But it was impossible. She might as well have tried to overturn a mountain. There, helpless as an infant, yet with the full knowledge of her own strength, she half reclined, gazing into her lap with blanched face and parted lips. Her eyes were riveted with a stony glare upon an object which, under like conditions, would have stricken terror to the soul of the bravest person—man or woman. A huge rattlesnake was coiled there, with his bead-like eyes watching and gloating over her every attempt to move in resistance to his power!

The flat head of the hideous reptile was slightly raised, and his forked tongue darted out like oft repeated black flashes of lightning against a yellow background. The horror on Esther's face deepened into the most painful expression. Every lineament was drawn and disfigured by more than bodily agony. The snake raised his ugly head still more, and his wicked eyes twinkled like two pin-heads, heated to the highest point. They glowed with venomous light, and lured his victim closer and closer.

What words can describe the loathing in Esther's heart at that awful moment? What pen can picture the despairing helplessness which wound about her like a black shroud of somber import? Alas, none! The air seemed full of fine black particles, which, coming together in friction, produced soft music, rendering the charm which enthralled her every faculty a thousand times harder to break. She felt a weight of depression upon her chest—a sudden chill which drove back the blood from her limbs,

leaving them cold and clammy, as if touched by the damp hand of death.

The coils of the mottled serpent unwound more and more, and he drew a trifle nearer, until she almost felt his breath upon her cheek. His tail began to oscillate to and fro with a smooth, wavy motion. The sharp click of his rattle fell upon her ear.

It was like a knell of approaching doom. She knew that the rattlesnake never struck until after he had sounded his warning, and she knew that the rattle was a sure precursor of the fatal blow.

By a mighty effort she forced her eyes together, and in that condition, with her brain whirling in an indescribable eddy of despair, she awaited her death.

The poisonous stroke did not fall. Why was the delay? In her hopeless agony she asked herself the question half petulanty. Then she opened her eyes. The snake was still there, but his orbs were no longer fixed on hers. His head was turned to one side, and his eyes glared with redoubled brilliancy. A greenish froth had gathered about his mouth, and he was lashing the air with his tail, clicking his rattles in the wildest rage.

Esther's strength began to come back as soon as the eyes of the serpent were recalled from her. He was moving away, and his slimy form slipped slowly off from her body. Then new sounds fell upon Esther's hearing. They were sharp, cat-like snarls. Her eyes wandered slowly in the direction of the noises, and she saw that a new actor had appeared upon the scene.

It was Vixen.

Dancing about, just out of the reach of the huge snake, showing her formidable teeth and "spitting" with apparent rage, as all cats do, the noble animal

was enticing the reptile away from Esther's prostrate form.

Vixen would bound forward almost within reach of her hissing, rattling enemy, making a feint as if about to attack the crawling, repulsive thing, and then spring backward just in time to avoid the murderous fangs as they descended with incalculable rapidity. The snake was in a wild fury of disappointment, and soon forgot all about his former prey. He followed the retreating form of the wildcat, without turning one way or the other, and bent only upon revenge.

The subtle influence removed, Esther soon regained control of her limbs. She was a courageous girl, as I have already intimated, and no sooner was she fairly herself again than she resolved to put an end to the snake, which had come so near depriving her of life.

Many girls, under like circumstances, would have run; but she was far from being like an ordinary young woman in this as well as other respects.

Seizing a heavy billet of wood, she approached within striking distance of her enemy, who was fully occupied with Vixen. Then, with careful accuracy, she launched out a blow with all her force, the club catching the snake just behind his head, upon the slenderest and most delicate part of his body.

The reptile coiled up in a labyrinthine knot, and then straightened out in the death-agony. In another instant Esther had dropped her weapon, and with Vixen folded in her warm embrace, was covering the intelligent animal's face with kisses.

CHAPTER X.

ADVERSITY.

Sycamore Dan stood an instant, irresolute, over the spot where the girls had been but a short time previously. He fully believed that they had fallen into the hands of the band of assassins who had attacked the camp.

His first impulse was to dash out of the tent and attack the robbers single-handed, for the purpose of wresting from them the prizes they had gained. But his brain was too well balanced to allow him thus to throw away the only possible chance of liberating them. He saw in an instant what an utterly hopeless task such a one would be, and he cast quickly about for some substitute. Now, if Ryan were only there——

Ah! the very idea. He remembered that the scout had told him, when the tide was turning against them, to go as soon as possible after the fight to a spot which he indicated. There the partners would meet.

That seemed to be the most feasible plan, and Dan lost no time in adopting it. Bending over so as to avoid attracting attention, he glided out of the tent, and was soon traveling at a quick gait away to the northward.

Ryan's directions, he remembered, were to go as fast as possible directly to the northward for a distance of about five miles. Having done that, he was to stop and give a signal, which should be an imita-

tion of the cry of a crow. In answer to this would be heard the howl of a coyote, by which he could tell with tolerable accuracy the whereabouts of his partner. By repeating the signal from time to time and listening for a response, he could easily trace him to his waiting-place.

The detective covered the ground as rapidly as possible, not stopping to wonder if he was going the right road, but, pushing straight ahead, with his eyes fixed on the north star, and all his thoughts bent on the problem of how to recover the lost girls from the hands of their supposed captors.

For about an hour he traveled without an instant's cessation. At the end of that time, having satisfied himself that he had gone about as far as Ryan had directed, he stopped and gave the signal which had been agreed upon.

The answer came promptly, and close at hand. In five minutes he was with Ryan and Robinson, whose presence was soon explained.

The ex-Bloodsucker came forward at once, and stood in an attitude of humiliaton before the detective.

"Well, my man," said Dan, quietly, "what do you want to say?"

The fellow stood silent a moment before replying.

At length he spoke.

"I hardly know," he said. "The truth is, that I have done you a mighty mean action, and if you did what you ought, you would kill me in my tracks. But I can only repair the wrong I have done by making myself your servant through life. I don't ask you to trust me—Heaven knows I don't deserve it. I only say give me a chance to retrieve as best I may the greatest wrong of my life. And if I do an

act that leads you to think I am playing false, do not hesitate an instant, but shoot me down as you would shoot a dog."

Robinson spoke with earnestness, and in a tone which left little room to doubt that he was wholly sincere. The detective's experience had fitted him to judge with considerable accuracy of the motives of those who talked to him.

When the man ceased speaking, Dan, who had been regarding him intently, held out his hand, and replied:

"I'll believe what you say, Jack Robinson; and if you keep your promise, you have my word that you shall not go unrewarded. There's my hand on it."

Robinson seized the outstretched token of friendship and confidence, and would have pressed it to his lips had the detective not prevented him.

The three then sat down to discuss their plans. It was nearly daylight now, but they did not fear surprise, because the spot in which they were hidden was so secluded that only one thoroughly acquainted with the locality could have found them out.

"Wall," said Ryan, drawing a long whiff upon his pipe, "what's to be did? It's high time we was a-movin', ef we're goin' to do anything to-day."

The others sat still a moment. Sycamore Dan, though well up in the profession of tracking fugitives in cities, knew well enough the superiority of both his companions at the kind of work now before them. So he offered no suggestions. Robinson, owing to his peculiar position, did not feel justified in making any remarks, and therefore the whole responsibility fell upon the scout.

"I hev ben a-thinkin'," he said, after a few moments of abstraction, "thet we orto know jest whar

the gals hez gone. Tharfore I'd siggist thet Mister Robinson go an' make a circle 'round whar we was camped last night, and look at the trails leadin' in all directions. Ef he sees anythin' o' impottuns let him come back hyar an' report. We'll wait fer him."

Robinson did not demur at the task, but was soon gone, moving away with the stillness of one fully accustomed to the ways of people on the border. Dan and Ryan were both satisfied that he would not turn traitor, and so passed no comments upon his accession to their forces. Both saw that he would be a powerful ally in the work they had to do, and were willing to take the chances on his fealty.

In a very few moments after his departure both were sound asleep—for they knew that, in order to perform the task that lay before them they must husband their strength. They were thoroughly tired out by the exertions of the previous night, and slept soundly.

But they were not so deeply buried in slumber that they did not awaken suddenly when they found six or eight men upon their recumbent forms holding them down.

Almost before their eyes were fairly open they were bound hand and foot. The first person who met their startled gaze, when their captors withdrew a step or two, was Dick Hatfield. That worthy was smiling with delight.

"Morning, boys!" was his salutation, delivered with a curling lip.

Neither of the prisoners vouchsafed any reply.

"Well, my fine fellows, you were going to kill me, were you?

"Never count your chickens until they are hatched. Just now," he continued, "I have got the best of the

argument, and I don't propose to give up the advantage."

"Wal," growled Ryan, "what are ye goin' to do about it?"

"I'll show you," responded the villain, with a wicked leer. "Men, tie this fellow to yonder tree."

It was soon done.



"WAL," GROWLED RYAN, "WHAT ARE YE GOIN' TO DO ABOUT IT?"

"Now tie this other chap to that one," pointing it out as he spoke. "Now gag them."

Heavy bandages were bound firmly over their mouths, and Hatfield's party prepared to mount their horses. When all was ready the dark-skinned

reprobate walked over to a position between the two prisoners and spoke.

"Posey Ryan," he said, "your race is run. You are in a place now where you can't get out, work how you may. You played it pretty neatly on me, but I escaped you, and I never forget or forgive an injury. You will stay here, bound to this tree, until the wolves gnaw away your flesh—*you will stay here until you* STARVE!"

With a bitter, mocking laugh he turned, and, waving his hand in a parting salute, led his men away.

Starve! How dismal and dreary was that word! How terrible it sounded there in the great solitude.

The two captives, bound hand and foot, looked into each other's eyes. What did they read there? Nothing but despair. Their fates were staring them in the face.

Starve! Did either of them know the fearful meaning of that little word, which kept repeating itself in their ears?

Yes; for they shuddered in blank dismay at the prospect of horrible suffering which opened before them. They could see nothing ahead but darkness, agony, and death.

CHAPTER XI.

ESTHER'S NARROW ESCAPE.

Robinson went at once, without any hesitation, to the spot where the hunters' camp had been the previous night. The place was deserted, and he had little difficulty in making a circle around it, examining all trails leading off in different directions. He discovered the place where the Bloodsuckers had branched off, traveling away to the westward, and after searching carefully the foot-prints, he saw that there were two horses with them which did not belong to the regular band. He was enabled to reach this conclusion by a very simple method.

The animals used by Persimmon Bill's band belonged to a peculiar breed, known as Texan mustangs. Their hoofs were small and of peculiar formation. All the other horses in the region, or a majority of them at least, were broncos, or cross-breeds, half American stock, and half Indian ponies. Their feet were full and round, showing on the trail in marked contrast to the others.

Having satisfied himself on that score, the ex-robber continued his search. He had completed a wide semicircle to the southward, when his eyes fell upon the tracks made by Esther in her hasty flight. He scanned her foot-prints closely, and soon became certain that she had made her escape alone. The only track that had been imprinted upon the ground since hers was that left by Vixen.

He was puzzled for a few minutes by this strange

mark, but finally recalled the fact that a wild-cat which accompanied Ryan had once chased him as far as the edge of the Smoky, and he needed no further assurance as to why the tracks were there.

Continuing his search he found the trail where he had made his exit from the busy scene of the night previous, in company with Ryan. Near it he discovered the fresh hoof-prints of half a dozen of the band. Half wondering if they were following his own tracks, he passed on, completing the circuit.

During his journey he had been careful not to attract the attention of any one who might be hanging about the place, and at the same time had kept watch for any indications of life. His lookout was unrewarded by any signs, however, and he became convinced that the spot was deserted.

Not more than half satisfied with his work, and trying in vain to solve the mystery of the half-breed horses which accompanied his former associates upon their retreat, he stole cautiously to the spot where the camp had been. He remembered perfectly where the tent containing the girls stood, and he made a straight line toward it after having ascertained beyond all doubt that he was alone.

Close beside the door-way he found tracks leading to the place where they had been separated. There he saw the trail left by Esther, and in the broken ground where Harper had made his desperate fight for liberty, the searcher could detect occasionally the tiny foot-prints left by Marian. These he succeeded in tracing to a spot where the strange horses had been brought. There the delicate tracks were lost sight of. That solved the mystery.

"One of the girls has been caught and one has escaped," he said, "I wonder which one it was.

Heaven help her, wherever she may be and keep her out of the hands of that arch villain, Persimmon Bill."

Robinson looked about him. On all sides were the evidences of the terrible battle which had been waged a few hours ago. Men in all attitudes which the anguish of death could dictate, lay prone upon the upturned turf. Moving about among them he recognized many of his old comrades, and he was not altogether displeased at the sight. The magnanimity of Posey Ryan, compared with the selfish coldness of his old boon companion, Hatfield, had completely won him over from his evil associates, and bound him in firm chains of friendship to the avengers who were on the trail of the robbers.

Robinson perceived with surprise that the Blood-suckers had carried away but little of the plunder with which the hunters had been heavily stocked. He could not account for that on any other theory than that the chief had only intended to take the girls, and wished to make a hasty retreat so as to avoid being hampered by useless weight. The converted villain was standing there thinking, in a vein that was half moralizing, when he was awakened from his reverie by a slight sound behind him. He turned quickly on his heel, and brought his rifle to the full cock, half expecting to meet the gaze of some enemy lowering upon him.

What was his surprise to see, standing not a rod away, his old enemy, Vixen, gazing at him with a look that was half-doubtful, half-questioning?

A slight sensation of uneasiness passed over him as he recalled the last occasion upon which they met, but as she showed no intention of reopening

hostilities, he was speedily reassured as to her intentions.

She looked him over carefully from head to foot, and then, apparently satisfied with the result of her investigation, she came trotting up to him, and seizing the hem of his pantaloons in her teeth, tugged with all her strength.

"Well," exclaimed Robinson, in puzzled tones. "What on earth does *that* mean?"

Vixen evidently understood his inability to comprehend her meaning, for she immediately desisted from her unintelligible attempts, and running off a few steps in the direction in which the trail taken by Esther led, she raised her muzzle in the air, and whined piteously. This performance she repeated two or three times, occasionally stopping and looking him in the face with an expression which seemed to say:

"You are very stupid; will you never understand?"

"Is she trying to make me follow her?" asked Robinson, half aloud. "I have heard of cases where animals have done such things.

"I believe I'll try her, anyhow, and see if she knows what she is about."

As soon as he started toward the place where she stood, Vixen sprang into the air, giving every indication of joy, and then started away rapidly upon the trail, stopping every moment to see if Robinson was following.

He went on far enough to see that he had rightly understood her purpose, and then stopped an instant in hesitation.

Clearly, he ought to go on, to the rescue of the girl, who might be alone and unprotected from many surrounding evils. But if he undertook that journey,

which would in all probability detain him several hours, what would Ryan and Dan think had become of him?

He remembered that he was on probation with them, and a prolonged absence might lead them to the supposition that he had deserted them. He had already spent fully four hours away from the camp, and any further delay might provoke hard feelings against him. Still, if he put off this opportunity he might lose forever the chance to save her; for, while he was going back to his companions, the robbers, equally intent upon finding her, might head him off successfully.

Robinson's hesitation was but momentary. The danger to which the young woman was exposed, overbalanced every other emotion in his mind, and he pushed rapidly forward giving no further thought to the friends he had left behind.

As soon as Vixen had become convinced that he was fairly upon the trail, with the intention of following it to the end, she gave him a reassuring look, and then started ahead with renewed speed.

He followed as fast as he could, but the animal gained upon him at every step, and was soon out of sight. Still he did not give up the pursuit. In fact he hurried on faster than before, because he thought he recognized in her haste an indication that he, too, ought to get along as rapidly as possible.

In about an hour and a half he dashed through the trees into a little opening in the forest, just in time to find Esther with her arms about the faithful wild-cat, close beside the spot where the snake was writhing in the last throes of dissolution.

When her eyes first met his, she was frightened more than she had been before, if possible. She

imagined, of course, that Robinson had escaped during the fight of the night previous, and had tracked her down for the purpose of handing her over to the tender graces of Persimmon Bill.

But the man soon explained the position in which he stood, and the apparent understanding which existed between himself and Vixen helped to convince Esther that he spoke the truth.

It was now nearly twelve o'clock, and neither of them had tasted food since the night previous.

Fortunately Robinson had in his pocket some bits of jerked venison, and on this they breakfasted frugally before starting on their return journey.

When they had finished their meal they looked about them for Vixen. She was nowhere to be seen. Both were astonished at the discovery of her absence, but soon reassured themselves by finding that her tracks led back over the trail they had come over.

The pair now started to return toward the place where Ryan and Sycamore Dan had been left. They followed the old trail some distance, when a new thought seemed to strike Robinson, who branched off suddenly to the right, bidding Esther follow him. She did so obediently, but soon asked an explanation of this new freak. Her conductor turned to her with a knowing look upon his face.

"You probably noticed, as we came along," he said, "that the ground was soft, and that we left a very plain trail behind us?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Well, we are now working to higher ground. After a few more paces we shall be on a stony ledge where we shall leave no signs. Then we shall double on our pursuers, should any of the band fol-

low us, and thus delay them, even if we do not throw them completely off the scent."

Esther saw at once the wisdom of the plan, and so gave up arguing the question with him. But as they passed along she asked about her father and sister, and also about Ryan and Dan. These inquiries he answered to the best of his ability, going so far as to give a very clear description of the spot where the two partners were awaiting them.

He had no especial reason for so doing, but it proved to be one of the most fortunate circumstances of his life; for the details had scarcely left his lips when a series of incidents occurred which came near putting an end to all their plans.

Robinson and his fair charge were just ascending over a little knoll of limestone, beyond which the same formation existed for a full mile, and then came to a sudden end upon the brink of a shallow rivulet.

The guide chanced, when near the brow of the slight eminence, to glance down into the valley which stretched along a few hundred yards away, and almost directly parallel with the course they were following.

His eye swept up and down the narrow depression, and then came to a sudden halt. He started violently, and then fell flat upon the ground, motioning Esther to follow suit. She lost no time in doing so, because she had learned to place implicit confidence in him.

After lying for a moment, Robinson raised his head, and peered cautiously about him. His gaze was met by three or four figures, moving noiselessly along over the trail lately traversed by himself, leading from the camp to the spot where he had

found Esther. He had little difficulty in recognizing Dick Hatfield and a number of the Bloodsuckers. Their errand he divined at once.

They were searching for Esther Harper.

Their leader had dismounted from his horse, and was leading the animal by his bridle, while the rest of his companions followed on behind at a slow space. Robinson's rifle came to his shoulder in an instant, and covered his dusky skinned enemy. Hatred flashed from his eyes, and he looked as if bound to take revenge for his past grievances.

But just in time he checked himself. He could not hope to conquer the whole number, and to thus expose the whereabouts of himself and Esther would be madness.

Yet something must be done, and that at once. He had not much time to lose. The pursuers would follow the old trail along to the point where the second one branched off, and there would be but a few moments of intervening time before they would be on the spot where the fugitives now stood. Resistance against such odds would be worse than useless. He must pit his strategy against the superior physical force of his enemies. Robinson looked about him. By the merest chance his eyes fell upon the upright trunk of a huge tree. Near the roots was a large fissure, which suggested the presence of a roomy cavity above. Glancing again in the direction taken by the Bloodsuckers, he saw that they had disappeared around a point of wooded land. Springing to his feet, he directed Esther to enter the opening at the foot of the tree.

"When those fiends are gone," he added, "come out and make the best of your way around to where Ryan and Sycamore Dan are even now awaiting my

coming. I may have to accompany these scoundrels away; but I will escape from their clutches just as soon as there is an opportunity, and will then return to my friends. I may get information that is worth having, by appearing to join their forces again. There—that's right. Stay where you are, and keep perfectly still."

"But if I am discovered——"

"You will not be. But should any accident befall you, use this pistol. It may be of service to you."

By the time he had finished talking Esther was safely ensconced in the hollow trunk of the tree, where there was an abundance of room for her form.

As soon as she was safely inside, Robinson procured a heap of dry bushes and threw them upon the ground where she had disappeared. Then he sat down to wait for the coming of Hatfield's gang.

He was not kept long in suspense.

The regular tramp of the horses' feet soon fell upon his ear. His hand wandered mechanically to his rifle, and he was half tempted, even at that late hour, to have his revenge on Hatfield, and then fight it out with the rest of them. A happy thought flashed upon him.

"By George, I'll do it!" he exclaimed to himself. "I won't kill him, but I'll give him a dig that he won't forget for one or two months.

And Robinson fairly laughed at the idea which had presented itself to him. He cocked his rifle and brought it to his shoulder, glancing along the barrel and chuckling at the thought that he was going to "get even" with Hatfield for deserting him in the hunters' camp.

At the same instant the head of the sub-chief of the Bloodsuckers came in sight down the incline, not

much more than a hundred yards away. Robinson was lying flat upon the ground, and therefore was hidden from sight. Hatfield was leading his horse, and examining the trail as he came along. As he approached, his form became more easily distinguishable above the chaparral. The upper part of his body was soon easily discernible, and Robinson took deliberate aim at the extreme edge of the robber's right shoulder. Then, as the exultant grin deepened upon his face, he calmly pressed his forefinger to the trigger, and as the effect of his shot was seen, he rolled over on his back in a paroxysm of mirth.

The bullet went straight to its mark. Hatfield was, of course, taken completely by surprise. He staggered back a step or two, and then fell heavily upon his side.

His companions rushed eagerly forward, expecting to meet a foe. They had not gone many paces when they came face to face with Robinson himself, who, with an artfully simulated expression of concern, rose and came out to meet them, protesting loquaciously his innocence of any intention of harm.

"Why, boys," he ejaculated, in surprised tones; "is it you? I heard your horses come pounding along up the hill, and thought you were some of those infernal hunters tracking me down. But I hope I didn't hurt anybody."

"I dunno," responded one of the men. "Mister Hatfield is on his back down yonder, an' I'm a leetle onsartin as to how he is jest now. But what in thunder are ye doin' roun' yere?"

"I was hunting for a young woman, about whom the chief has made all this disturbance. However,

we will talk of that another time. Let us return to Hatfield at once. He may need our aid."

They found the robber lying where he had fallen, loading the air with horrible imprecations.

As soon as he learned that Robinson had caused his wound, he was wild with rage.

"Accident!" he exclaimed, bitterly. "You're a liar! You did it on purpose!"

"S-s-s-h!" responded Robinson, with a deprecating gesture. "You horrify me by such base suspicions. Be calm, and let me dress your wound."

He lifted the bleeding villain into a half-upright position, and then, with fingers not the gentlest in the world, proceeded to bind up his wound. Once, when no one was looking, he stooped over so his lips were close to Hatfield's ear, and murmured:

"Think you'll go away and leave me to be murdered next time?"

The reply to this taunting speech was a terrible oath, which was overheard by one of the men. The entire party more than suspected their former associate of having been fully aware as to where his rifle was aimed when he fired the shot which was so painful to their present companion. But they had no very violent affection for Hatfield, and so felt no disposition to quarrel with the man they liked far the better of the two.

While Robinson was busying himself with dressing the dusky robber's wound—incidentally causing him as much pain as possible—the other Bloodsuckers were searching for the trail of Esther. As her guide had foretold, the instant they struck the limestone ledge they lost every trace.

They searched in all directions, but were utterly nonplused. If she had vanished into the air, they

could not have been taken more aback. Robinson soon learned that just prior to his departure from the scene of victory, Persimmon Bill had dispatched Hatfield and the men who were with him, charging them to recover Esther at any cost. His own retreat had been hurried by the discovery that but few of the hunters were killed. He knew their tenacious dispositions, and surmised that they would concentrate their forces at once, and prepare to attack him again. He had no wish to meet them without his usual advantage, and determined that he would make a wide detour and throw them off the track.

In return for this information the ex-Bloodsucker assured the party that he had discovered Esther's trail, and knowing his chief's eagerness to consummate her capture, had taken upon himself the task of catching her. He had followed her as they had until he struck the limestone ridge. That had baffled him as completely as it had themselves.

The men believed him implicitly, and were glad to have him once more one of their number.

As soon as Hatfield could be moved, they placed him again upon his horse, and then the party pushed ahead across the belt of rock, soon reaching the precipitous spot at the bank of the little rivulet spoken of before. At that point they halted in uncertainty, gazing about utterly bewildered. At no point could they find any token which seemed to indicate that the person they were seeking had gone that way.

"It is my opinion," volunteered Robinson, who was, of course, deeply interested in leading them as far away from the correct spot as possible; "it is my opinion that she has taken to the stream, in order to baffle us. By George, boys, she's a smart one!"

Nearly all his companions were inclined to the

samebelief. They would not have readily admitted that any woman could have the cunning to adopt such skillful measures, had they not already experienced an evidence of it in the readiness with which she had led them to the limestone ledge.

It was not a solace to their wounded feelings to know that they had been baffled by a woman. But there was no help for it, and their only chance of getting even with her at last was to follow on down the bank of the creek, keeping their eyes open for the place where she should have left the water.

Nothing they might have decided upon would have given Robinson better satisfaction, and it was with a light heart and an elastic step that he led the way upon this new departure.

CHAPTER XII.

ESTHER'S JOURNEY.

Esther remained in her narrow compartment until some time after the last sounds died away in the distance. She was far from comfortable in the confined space, but she reflected that the alternative of three or four hours amid uneasy surroundings, was far preferable to the misery which was implied by possible capture by her blood-thirsty lover, and so managed to bear her load with brave patience.

The time moved by with leaden wings. It seemed to her as if the instant when her persecutors should be out of range would never arrive. And it was with the sincerest thankfulness that she perceived, through a convenient knot-hole, the retreat of the pursuing band.

But even then she remained motionless, without making a sound to betray her presence. She was determined to be on the safe side. What if they had forgotten something, and a member of their party should return just in time to discover her coming from her hiding-place? No. She would avoid the possibility by remaining secreted a little while longer.

But when half an hour had passed, and she had seen nothing to arouse her suspicions, she slipped softly down to the bush-covered aperture, and pushing aside the boughs which had been placed there to hide the opening, crept out into the daylight.

Everything was quiet on all sides. Not a branch

quivered to indicate life. All nature was as quiet as if wrapped in slumber.

Esther stole quietly over to the bank of the stream and looked in all directions, as if half expecting that every bush and tree hid a lurking foe. She had not realized before what a terrible thing it was to be alone and unprotected in the midst of a wilderness filled with savage Indians and unprincipled white men. In the presence of Robinson, when once assured that he meant no mischief, she had not known what fear was. But when the force of circumstances deprived her of his company, she realized at once the full loneliness of her condition.

Esther Harper was no coward, and she did not quail or cringe before the dark prospect which confronted her. But, brave and self-reliant as she was, she could not altogether stay the misgivings which gnawed at her heart.

She lost no time, however, in useless reflections, but pushed ahead without hesitation. It was already past three in the afternoon, and she knew that the journey before her was long and arduous.

Fixing her course due north—having determined the right direction by the position of the sun—she started as rapidly as possible toward her destination.

She walked with such good effect that at about half-past five o'clock she came in sight of the spot whence she had fled in such precipitate haste the previous night. She shuddered at the thought of passing over the field of battle and looking upon those who had fallen in death. The thought was terrible to her, and, wishing to avoid the sickening sight, she took a wide circle to the left, thus skirting the dreaded place.

This maneuver cost her extra exertion and

some time, but she felt repaid when she found herself once more on a strange road to the northward.

About this time, too, she began to be assailed by the qualms of hunger. Fortunately, Robinson had, in parting, given her all that was left of the jerked venison, and this she lunched upon as she walked along.

At different points in her journey she recognized landmarks described to her by Robinson, and was thus enabled to assure herself that she was on the right road.

She struggled bravely ahead, although deeply fatigued by the trying events of the past twenty-four hours. And it was at this time that a new element presented itself against her. Darkness was coming on, and rapidly.

What should she do in such a predicament? Traveling over a country that was entirely unknown to her, excepting through the description of a second person, how could she expect to find her way?

True, she could determine pretty accurately the distance she had traveled by the time occupied; but by what means could she be sure that she did not vary to the right nor to the left?

But she was one of those determined persons who, whether for right or wrong, make up their minds quickly and then go ahead; and she lost not an instant in bringing herself to the conclusion that the best course was to push right forward and take the chances of going so near the camp occupied by Ryan and his partner that they might hear and hail her.

Therefore, having made up her mind to that, she passed on without hesitation. In about an hour she felt satisfied that she had traveled pretty nearly the

distance planned. Then she found it necessary to adopt new tactics. She would advance a few paces and then halt to listen.

Unfortunately, it was the wrong part of the month for the moon, else she would have experienced little difficulty in picking out her course. But she persevered with tenacity, and would not be discouraged by the dull prospect. Each moment it became less promising, and each moment her heart sank lower by almost imperceptible degrees, until she was well-nigh despairing.

Many times she went ahead, and many times she halted, expecting to hear some sign. But she was disappointed at every succeeding turn.

What if, after all, she should miss the friends she sought? What would become of her then? Fort Hays was a long distance off, and she would have great difficulty in reaching it, even under the most favorable circumstances. In her present plight the task seemed impossible, and as the time passed without any apparent hope of finding those for whom she was searching, her lot seemed indeed pitiful. She trembled at the thought of what might possibly befall her, and a cold, settled despair crept upon her as she contemplated the unpleasant picture.

Hark! what was that?

She stopped to listen. Surely her ears had not deceived her. No, for there it was again, close at hand —the sharp, familiar voice of Vixen calling to her through the night!

With a glad cry of welcome, she bounded quickly forward to greet with cordial embrace her old and cherished friend.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DARK DAY FOR THE PARTNERS.

In the dim gray light of the morning Ryan and Dan looked at each other in despair. For a few moments they could see no outlet from the trap in which they were caught. Each had been more or less confused by the sudden awakening from peaceful slumber, and neither fully recovered the perfect use of his faculties until after the Bloodsuckers left.

Then as their minds drifted over the other events connected with the imprisonment, little rays of hope began to burst through the thick clouds, and they could see faint chances for deliverance.

As is frequently the case with men who have been associated with each other for any length of time, their thoughts ran in the same identical channel, and followed each other closely. Of course they could not communicate with each other, even by facial expressions. The broad bandages in which their mouths were swathed to prevent them from attracting possible aid, also served the purpose of checking any contortions of the muscles.

Sycamore Dan was bound with such exceeding firmness that he could not move a solitary muscle; and both men, as they stood with such enforced erectness against the trees, presented a spectacle that was at once grotesque and painful.

Ryan had a slight advantage over his companion, for one of the thongs binding his ankles had become loosened a trifle, so that by the exercise of his great

strength he soon succeeded in getting one foot entirely free.

But that was not of much material aid to him in conveying his thoughts to his partner, although he certainly did find that it gave him relief in standing, because he was no longer confined to any one particular attitude.

I have intimated that after the first few moments of their captivity, their spirits began to rise, almost simultaneously.

Both were thinking of Robinson.

Why, of course! How ridiculous it was to suppose that he would not soon come back and release them. And how fortunate they had been to form an alliance with him as they did? How very foolish it was for them to give themselves a single moment of uneasiness about their prospects. True, the position in which they stood was rapidly becoming irksome—but then, the time would not be long before they would again be free.

Their eyes met for the second time; and though debarred from elaborate communication, neither of them found it very difficult to read an easier and pleasanter expression in his partner's orbs.

But as an hour dragged slowly by, and then another, their hopes grew less radiant, and their confidence less perfect. Why did not Robinson come to their rescue? Could it be possible that he had repaid their kindness by such baseness? Yes, it certainly had that look. As Ryan dwelt upon the series of incidents just past, he reproached himself bitterly for having allowed a notorious villain to hoodwink him in that fashion.

At that moment he would have given almost anything he possessed for the power of speech, in order

that he might upbraid his own foolishness verbally. But, if he could not speak aloud, he could think—and think he did. The tenor of his reflections was like this:

"Dern my ugly mug! Posey Ryan, ye're the doggonedest, blamebest id-jit I ever seen! Fire an' brimstun! Ef ever ye git outen this scrape, ye'd better go off summers, into some quiet locallerty, an' soak that wooden head o' yourn fer the rest o' yer nat'ral an' onnat'ral days. The idee o' bein' picked up fer a flat, by sich a lop-eared, bow-legged duffer ez thet Jack Robinson!

"H'mph! Ye desarve to starve. In course he'd go back onte ye—any dern fool could hev told ye so. Why, jest ez soon ez ye let him outen yer sight, in course he went an' hunted up his pardners, an' brought 'em right hyar, so's they could scoop ye in. Tarantalers an' bull-dogs! but ye are a green one—blamed ef ye ain't, Posey!"

Having delivered himself of this mental self-scorching, Ryan set about trying to devise some plan of escape. But that was useless, and he soon gave it up in disgust.

Sycamore Dan's thoughts were of the same order, but instead of blaming Ryan, he laid all the opprobrium upon himself for not having taken Robinson at his word, and sent an ounce of lead through him that morning.

But self-accusations were useless, and they soon had other matters to think about; for, as the day progressed they became both hungry and thirsty. No one not forcibly deprived of food and drink can for a moment appreciate the awful agony of the trial they underwent.

And then, as if this were not enough, they suf-

fered intensely from the thongs which bound them. The slender strips of hide cut into their flesh cruelly, and every moment caused their wrists and ankles to swell more and more, so that the pain grew intense to a fearful extent.

But I shall not attempt to describe the horrors of that day—they may be imagined, but not put upon paper. It is impossible to conjure up language fitting to the occasion.

It was long after noon when Vixen trotted in between the two. She stood for a moment, looking at one and then the other in a knowing way, and after satisfying herself of the condition of affairs, she sat down and gazed calmly at her master.

"She's a-laffin' at me, I b'leve," reflected Ryan.

"Consarn her! why didn't she come hyar in time to post us, so's we'd hev got away from the devils?'

But his thoughts did not trouble Vixen. After gazing fixedly at him for an hour or more, she trotted to his feet and curled herself up to sleep; and there she lay all the afternoon, not moving or showing any signs of life.

At length, after what seemed an interminable space of weariness, darkness fell. The two friends had been tied to their posts for fourteen hours! How much longer must they wait for deliverance, either at the hands of friends, or by death?

It was awful to think of another day like the past one. Heavens! The future was unendurable.

Wrapped in somber thoughts—with the manhood almost crushed out of them by the terrible weight of suffering—they stood, or rather hung there in the night, waiting, waiting, waiting.

Without warning, as suddenly as a thunderbolt from out the skies, they heard the snapping of twigs!

In an instant they were alert and watchful. Some one was walking not far distant.

Vixen had heard the sound also, and was upon her feet sniffing the air.

Who could it be? Was it friend or foe?

In any case they must attract attention. But how? They were bound and gagged. Oh, bitterness! What a terrible position of suspense!

The steps came nearer, ceased an instant, and then went on. Good Heaven! The prisoners *must* make themselves known.

Dan did not stop to listen or think. One chance alone seemed feasible. *Vixen must tell the stranger where they were.*

The scout lifted his foot, and kicked her heavily in the ribs.

Could he have seen the reproachful look upon her face he would have bitterly repented that act. She only whined as if she was badly hurt.

The steps receded!

Heaven! Liberty was slipping slowly from their very grasp. Would Vixen never cry out? The agony of the two men was awful.

Ah! A long-drawn mournful cry of a coyote came over the hills! In the smallest part of a second the wild-cat was alive and aggressive. That sound was to her a signal of danger to her master. Bristling with anger, she lifted her muzzle in the air, and gave vent to a wild, loud screech. The footsteps stopped instantly. Again Vixen yelled.

Her cry was answered by a glad little feminine voice, exclaiming:

"Vixen! where are you? Come to me, come to me!"

And in ten seconds Esther Harper stood in the lit-

tle inclosure, between her captive friends, fairly weeping with joy.

CHAPTER XIV.

GETTING TO WORK.

Esther did not waste a particle of time in setting her friends free. She found a knife in Ryan's belt, and with its keen edge she instantly severed the bonds which held them.

Their timely release had as great a pleasing effect upon them as their long captivity had exerted in the direction of depression. As soon as the cords were removed from Ryan's limbs he gave a loud cheer, and began to do a double shuffle in defiance of the fact that his joints were almost as stiff as crowbars.

The influence of the deliverance was fully as exhilarating to Sycamore Dan, but he was more subdued in his expressions of delight.

Both men stopped only to thank Esther as briefly as possible for her opportune arrival, and then rushed headlong to the creek, where they laved their parched and swollen lips in the cooling water. Having partaken sufficiently of the liquid—sweeter than nectar to them—they bathed the parts which had been bound, and then went back to camp.

Ryan sat down upon the ground and fell into conversation with Esther, while Dan gathered fagots for a fire.

"Look a-hyar!" ejaculated the scout, as his partner was about to apply a match to the heap of twigs. "What in thunder are ye a-doin'?"

"Why, I'm lighting a fire so as to broil this bacon I have in my pocket," responded Dan.

"Thet's dangerous work, pard. Ye'll be likely to git some attenshun ye don't like, ef ye keep on. The light o' yer fire kin be seen miles off sich a night ez this."

"Can't help it," rejoined the detective, with some asperity. "I have had nothing to eat since last night, and I'm going to break my fast now, even if I do have to fight for it."

So saying he touched a match to the dry leaves, and soon had several fragrant slices of bacon frizzling over the little blaze. As soon as the frugal repast was cooked, however, the fire was extinguished, for the detective, although hungry, had no desire to run unnecessary risk.

The bacon was soon devoured, and the friends fell to talking.

"This," said Ryan, reflectively, "this is a day I sha'n't forget very soon, doggoned ef I do."

"Nor I," added Dan and Esther in the same breath.

"Bekase," continued Ryan, as if he had not heard what his friends said, "to-day I hev ben the derndest id-jit as ever traveled upon this earthly footstule."

"There's a pair of us," suggested the detective.

"How so?" asked Esther, who had not yet learned the circumstances leading to their captivity.

Sycamore Dan related in as few words as possible the story of the battle, the defeat, and his own search in the tent for Esther and her sister.

"Not finding you there," he added, "I felt confident that you must have been captured already, and it occurred to me that if I was going to rescue you from the hands of your captors the best way for me to do was to fight shy of that place for the pres-

ent until I could organize a war party to pursue the fiends. By a previous arrangement with Ryan, I knew where to find him, and repaired at once to this spot. What was my surprise, on arriving here, to discover that my partner was not alone, and that the person who accompanied him was none other than Jack Robinson?"

"Yes," interrupted the scout. "Thet's the kind of a doggoned fool I was. Ef my head was ez solid ez Pike's Peak, or ez holler as a toy balloon, I couldn't hev ben a bigger ignoramus!"

"Why do you say that?" asked Esther, in surprise.

"Why? Well, I'll tell you," continued Dan, taking up the thread of his story again where he had dropped it. "This man Robinson" (a growl from Ryan) "promised by all that was good and great, to do everything in his power to repair a wrong he had once done me, for you must know that the wound upon my head that day you and I first met was caused by this same Jack Robinson and a friend of his. Well, Ryan and I were just imbecile enough to believe his fair words, and we sent him on an important errand. During his absence we added to our foolish proceedings by calmly lying down and going to sleep. We were surprised in that condition, and placed in the plight you found us in. Of course there is but one solution to the mystery.

"And that is?"

Esther's eyes twinkled mischievously as she asked the question.

"Why, I should think a blind person could see it. I axes yer parding, Miss Esther," said Ryan, apologetically. "But it is mighty evident to me an' my pardner thar thet this double-dyed traitor, jest ez soon ez he got clear of us, went an' gave us away to

his frens. He is an infernal scoundrel, thet's what he is, an' ef ever we meet again I'll stick his hide so full o' cold lead thet it'll look like a nutmeg grate—I will, so help me——"

"Stop!" exclaimed Esther, so suddenly that the scout did not finish his sentence, and his uplifted hand fell to his side. "You will do nothing of the sort."

"Won't I? Wal, p'raps ye'll tell me why not."

The scout's tone indicated that he was annoyed at Esther's interference.

"Listen to my story, Posey Ryan, and if you still continue in your thirst for revenge, I shall not say you nay."

"Wal, fire away then. But I'm blamed if I kin forgive a chap what plays me so low down ez this one hez. Great snakes!"

Esther began her story, and related as briefly as possible the incidents of her flight, adventures, and final meeting with the ex-Bloodsucker. She laid particular stress upon the fact that his cunning had saved her from captivity, and pictured in glowing colors the meeting between Hatfield and his former companion.

The partners heard her through in silence. When she had finished Sycamore Dan drew a long sigh of relief.

"Miss Esther," he exclaimed, heartily, "I am glad to hear you give this explanation. In my profession it is the custom to believe every man a guilty wretch until he is proven innocent. But your vindication of this fellow Robinson has been so complete that I cannot for a moment doubt his integrity and the sincerity of his professed reform."

Esther looked at him gratefully.

"You are a generous man," she observed, "even if you are a trifle mysterious. I like you for your kindness of heart."

A great throb came in the detective's throat. He felt a strange thrill of pride at receiving praise from that source, and yet he could not explain his enjoyment. It was something entirely new to him. Almost before he had time to think he blurted out:

"There is no one in this world, Miss Esther, from whom I would rather hear those words."

It was an awkward compliment, but it seemed to give him relief. The expression was entirely spontaneous, and to have checked it would have cost him a struggle. On the whole he was glad he had spoken.

Up to this time Ryan had been entirely silent. The three sat so close together that they could distinguish each other, dimly, through the darkness, and now they noticed that the scout was peering fixedly at the ground, as if he would read there the answer to some question which perplexed his mind. Dan and Esther sat there watching him some seconds before speaking. Still he did not move.

"Well, pard," said the detective, at length, "have you nothing to say?"

"Yes, I hev," responded Ryan, after another moment of contemplative silence. "You folks hev made a purty fine picter o' this thing, but I wouldn't be afraid to bet a small stake thet ye're jest about ez badly sold ez ever ye was."

"Sold! Why, what do you mean?"

"Wal, in course it ain't none o' my bizness, ef ye both b'leve what ye say, an' ez majorities rule, in this free an' enlightened country, why I ain't got nothin' partickler to say, beyond sijjistin' thet ye're

both 'way offen the track. This is the way I put it up: Thet chap Robinson knows purty well what kind of men you an' me are, or he thinks he does. Wal, he went fust, an' sent them chaps back hyar to hitch us up, which they did, an' did thunderin' well, too. Then arterwards he waited till they came back to him. By thet time he hed stumbled onto the trail o' Miss Esther. When they come up to him he laid this plan o' sendin' her to us, an' pretendin' that it was to help her escape."

"But what could be his object? Your theory seems to lack an essential element."

"Does it? Wal, p'raps arter ye hear me through, ye won't think so quite ez much ez ye do now. Ye must remember thet this man Robinson hez allers looked on ye with some suspicion. He thout in the fust place, thet ye was a huntin' arter Persim William, an' no doubt he thinks thet his chief would like purty well to clap his peepers onto ye."

"If that was the case, why didn't they take us prisoners, and carry us bodily to their chief?"

"Look a hyar, Sycamore Dan! Are you a tellin' this yarn, or am I? Ef it's you, why jest go ahead an' spin it out. But ef I'm doin' it, do for the Lord's sake dry up, an' let me finish! Wal, ez I said, he thout ez how Bill would like to see ye, an' he knows mighty well thet I sh'd be a prize the boss would give a good deal to hev the whip-hand onto. Now when he foun' thet he'd be able to ketch Esther, he thout summat like this:

"Them men, ef we let em alone, will foller our trail, so's to git the t'other gal back agin. They ain't men thet will weaken at anythin' under heaven. Ef they'll do thet, why we kin lay a trap for 'em by an' by, an' they'll be dead sure to walk into it

'thout givin' us any trouble at all; whereas, ef we was to try the dodge o' carryin' them bodily, they'd be mighty likely to get away and make it allfired hot for us.

"Thet is why Robinson went ahead o' the others, an' thet is why he done all thet fine actin' fer the benefit o' Miss Esther. You mark my words, pardner, when we start on this trail we are dead sure to tumble into some mighty cunnin' pitfall, onless we keep our peepers peeled. D'ye think my theo-rye is so derned weak ez ye did a minnit ago?"

Dan did not reply for a moment. Undoubtedly there was force in the remarks of his partner. But still there seemed to be at least one weak point about the solution.

"Your insight does you credit, my friend," he said; "but supposing your explanation to have been correct, can you tell me why Robinson should have shot Hatfield, his partner in crime? Surely he would not have gained the latter's consent to such an arrangement?"

"Thets the only thing thet puzzles me," responded Ryan; "an ez ye say, s'posin' thet I'm kerrect, the on'y way I kin 'count fer it, is this: Thar ain't no doubt thet Robinson was down on Hatfield in real earnest. He was mad from 'way back. He thout he could kill two birds with one stun, d'ye see? Ef he could git even with Hatfield fer the game what was played by him, an' at the same time take away all doubt from Esther, why nothin' would hev suited him better on the face o' this terrestrial ball. Tarantalers an' catamounts! It seems ez plain ez day to me. Why, ef he could gobble us all without any extry trouble to hisself, he was jist the man to do it. In course, nothin' ain't sartin 'in life, but ef I was a

bettin' man I'd be willin' to do a leetle gamblin' onto this thing."

The scout's theory was undoubtedly very cunning, as well as plausible. But it did not fully convince his listeners. Perhaps Esther's opinion, in a matter of this kind, was of no special value, because her experience in life had been rather brief, as compared with that of her two companions. But she was naturally a shrewd girl, and her inborn tact seldom led her astray.

But with Dan it was a different matter. His knowledge of human nature was widely varied and complete; and although he was always open to conviction, when he had heard all sides of a case and firmly made up his mind to a certain decision, he was not easily changed from it. He was confident that Robinson had spoken his mind, and meant what he said, and he could not help acknowledging that there was force in Ryan's words.

"You have mapped out a pretty strong case, my friend," he said; "but I think you have done Robinson an injustice. However, time alone can tell. In the meanwhile let us at least be charitable. For one, I cannot but think you have made an error of judgment, shrewd and calculating as you are."

"And I agree with you again, Mr. Sycamore Dan," ejaculated Esther, with enthusiasm.

"Maybe, maybe," rejoined Ryan; "an' I hope I hev. But I sha'n't go back on what I've said till I find I'm wrong, ye kin bet on that. Anyhow, ef I *am* wrong, it'll be one of the very few times."

The conversation then turned to other subjects, and Esther told her friends all Robinson had imparted to her about the two broncho tracks mixed in the trail left by Persimmon Bill's party. This she cited

as an indication that her father and sister had been carried off.

"In the morning," said Ryan, "we'll start on the trail, an' afore many days we'll hev them outen the hands o' these devils, or know the reason why. But what puzzles me is, what in thunder we're a-goin' to do with Miss Esther while we're gone on this leetle trip."

The group were silent. That *was* a question, without mistake. Esther herself was the first to speak.

"I don't see why that should trouble you," she said, so quietly that they were startled by her manner.

"Why not?" asked Dan. "I think it is a matter of great importance. We must lose no time in starting. Already these men have too much headway, and we cannot afford to lose time. Otherwise the matter might be solved very easily, for we could escort you to Fort Hays, and then return to our other duties. As it is, I must confess that I am somewhat in the dark as to what is the best course."

"But *I* am not."

"Indeed? Then perhaps you will tell us what is to become of you?"

"Certainly—with pleasure. I shall join you in this undertaking."

A thunderbolt out of a clear sky could not have startled them more. Dan sat perfectly aghast with astonishment, and Ryan's only comment was a long-drawn whistle.

"To be sure I shall go!" reiterated Esther, stoutly. "Why should I not? If I were the one who was unfortunate enough to be captured, would not my father come to my rescue? Should I be less loyal

to him I could not hold up my head—I should sink with shame."

"I can understand your feelings, Miss Esther," said Dan, "and admire you for what you have said. It shows that you are a brave and self-sacrificing girl, and one that any man might be proud to number on his list of acquaintances. But have you fully weighed the danger, the hardship, the great risk of the journey we contemplate?"

"I have, sir, thought very fully upon the subject, and you will believe me when I say that no danger can be so great, no hardship so severe, no risk so hazardous as to deter me from my wish. I am no child, and I come from blood that does not run in the veins of cowards or people who hesitate. Of course, if you do not desire my companionship, I shall not force myself upon you. But I tell you that as certain as the sun rises to-morrow morning, I shall go to the rescue of my father. If I do not go with you, I shall go alone!"

She spoke with impetuous vigor, and where she made reference to her ancestry, there was a ring of pride in her voice, which had a deep significance. Her friends had not yet fully recovered from the surprise occasioned by her expressed determination, and so did not reply at once to her fiery speech of reiteration.

"Well," asked Dan of his partner, after a pause, "what do you say, Ryan?"

"I vote 'yea,'" responded the scout, good-humoredly. "She may prove of use to us in the big job we hev got on hand. At enny rate she won't hinder. All I'm afraid of is thet she'll not be able to stan' the journey."

But Esther assured them that she could endure

any amount of exposure in such a cause, and would listen to no dissuasions.

And so, that point settled, the party rolled up on the ground to sleep until morning. Esther to congratulate herself upon the good fortune which had led her to such friends as these; Ryan to cogitate with some bitterness upon the supposed desertion of Robinson, and Dan to reflect that Esther was simply the perfection of womanhood.

"By Jove," he asked himself, half drowsily, "I wonder if I am falling in love with her? Well," (after a pause) "if I am, I have the satisfaction of knowing that if I had searched the whole world over, I couldn't have found a better object for my affections."

And so the three friends dozed peacefully off, while Vixen kept guard.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FUGITIVES AND THEIR PRISONERS.

It becomes necessary at this time to follow the movements of Marian and Doc Harper, not only because much of the interest of this story attaches to them, but also in order to explain some future occurrences which might otherwise puzzle the reader.

When Robinson inferred from the traces left by the retreating band, that the two bronchos were ridden by Marian and her father, he showed that his long training on the frontier had not been in vain.

They had, indeed, been unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of their foes. They were soon bound, and as the hunters were thoroughly defeated by that time, the Bloodsuckers began to prepare for their retreat.

Old Doc Harper was half stunned and well-nigh exhausted by the sharp encounter he had taken part in, but felt disposed to be thankful that Esther, at least, had escaped. He was doubly grateful, because the whole attack had been planned and executed for the purpose of making this particular capture; and it furnished his resentment with food to know that, so far as the real object of the murderous assault was concerned, the whole thing was a failure.

But where was Esther? What would become of her, alone in the midst of a strange and wild country? Would she succeed in eluding the pursuers who would surely be sent upon her track? And if

she did, would she not perish from fatigue and starvation?

Better that—better a thousand times that she should die and go back to her Father pure and unsullied as when He sent her here, than to live a hundred lives on earth after once falling into the hands of Persimmon Bill.

It was a hard alternative, but it was the better of the two, and in the stern integrity of his heart he would have preferred it. He had little fear for Marian. The robber chief had always shown dislike for her, and therefore the danger was not so great in her case.

The band soon got under way, and before daylight appeared they were well on their way. The road chosen led them away to the southward, and during the afternoon it swung around toward the west.

One thing Harper could not understand—that was the non-appearance of the chief of the robbers. Although the party had been many hours on the march, Persimmon Bill was still invisible. But perhaps he had gone personally in search of Esther? That, no doubt, explained his absence. The father and daughter were allowed free intercourse, and improved the liberty thus given them by cheering each other as best they might.

Of the two, Marian was in the best spirits. She had all the sanguine disposition of youth, and was confident that before very long there would come a time when, in place of captivity, they should have freedom, and possibly an even exchange of positions with their enemies.. The young girl was defiant and aggressive. When one or two of the Bloodsuckers took occasion to speak to her in taunting

tones, she did not sulk or pout, but answered them in a like spirit to the one they exhibited. She was sharp and brilliant as a diamond, and they were glad, as a rule, to retire from her presence after a very few words.

One of their number, however, a repulsive-looking fellow, was more persistent than the rest. He returned to the attack after every rebuff, and more than once made use of expressions which were shocking to her ears. But, unfortunately, she was at his mercy, and her only weapon was her tongue. She made the most of her resources, however, and talked with such biting sarcasm that he at last became intensely enraged.

It was well along toward five o'clock in the afternoon when this culminating point to their conversation was reached. The prisoners rode far back toward the rear of the cavalcade, so that such of the band as cared to talk to them must pull up their horses and wait for them to catch up.

Marian and her tormentor were traveling side by side, and both were so thoroughly occupied in the task of making each other uncomfortable, that they did not notice a third horseman who approached behind them with the evident purpose of overhearing their remarks. The ruffian was in the midst of his cowardly work, and was saying:

"Oh, my fine bird, you may flutter and dash your wings against the bars now, but when we end this journey I shall tone you down a bit."

Marian shrugged her shoulders.

"Indeed! Do you think so? Now, let me tell you, that if you undertake that operation you will require help. It is not work that a half-witted child can succeed in doing unaided."

The man fairly gnashed his teeth at this thrust of bitter sarcasm.

"We shall see. The chief has never yet denied me any request I made of him; and when I tell him what is the dearest wish of my life, I am sure he will grant it."

"Well, perhaps he will. I have always heard that the best way to deal with people afflicted with imbecility is to humor them. But what might be the nature of this wish—the dearest wish of your life, I believe you said?"

"So you do possess, among other traits, the feminine one of curiosity. The wish is that you should be made my mistress."

Boiling with indignation as Marian was, she could have scarcely wished her tormentor to receive more instantaneous punishment than he did; for at that moment a huge revolver, thrown by an unerring hand, hurtled through the air and struck him upon the back of his head.

He fell forward upon the ground, stunned and bleeding, and a voice, which was not altogether unfamiliar to Marian's ears, called out these words, in an authoritative manner:

"Halt, men! One of your number has fallen."

The horses were stopped in a moment, and very shortly the men were gathered about the spot where their comrade lay. At this moment he began to show signs of returning consciousness, and, as soon as he had recovered enough to understand, the person who had spoken before said:

"Men, take warning by this. I want you to understand that this young lady's sister is all the world to me, and that so long as I am obliged to hold captive any friend or relative of hers, they must be re-



THE PRISONERS.

spected. The first man among you who repeats this performance, shall answer for it with his life. Move on."

The offender was assisted to his saddle, and accompanied the march with downcast eyes and subdued mien.

Marian and her father had instantly recognized in the speaker Esther's former lover, who was none other than Persimmon Bill himself.

Under any other circumstances both would have berated him in the most condemnatory terms for the part he had played. But he had rendered them a service in saving a defenseless girl from wanton insult, and they were obliged, reluctant though they were, to acknowledge a certain sense of gratitude to him.

At dusk the party halted, and took a rest of six hours duration, after which the mustangs were again saddled, and the weary journey was resumed. At daybreak there was another brief stop, and then they went on again.

About eight o'clock the leaders reached the bank of a shallow stream, the water of which flowed with great rapidity over a hard, pebbly bottom. Into this the horses were driven, and for the next four hours they floundered on through the river itself, following its course carefully.

Just as the sun reached the meridian the party came to a long, flat rock, lying in the midst of the narrow current. Upon this the horses were driven, and it was announced that there would be a rest of several hours.

This served as a relief for the tired travelers, many of whom were soon stretched at full length, basking in the warm sunlight, while the tough and

hardy beasts which had borne them munched upon grain taken from the sacks with which the two or three riderless horses were loaded.

For some time Marian was unable to determine why such an uncomfortable spot had been selected for the camp. But she was not kept in suspense. Several of the Bloodsuckers were soon busy making a kind of rude forge out of stones picked up from the river bottom. They then produced from one of the large sacks a heap of charcoal and some tools.

"What are they going to do?" asked the girl of her father.

"I'm sure I don't know, my child. But I should think they were about to open a blacksmith shop."

This random surmise proved to be nearly correct, for as soon as the fire had been lighted the men began to remove the shoes from the feet of their horses, turning them around, and fastening them on in a reversed direction.

"Thunder!" exclaimed old Doc Harper, when he fully understood the purport of this design. "They are reversing the shoes so as to leave a backward trail. You see, when we are going west, the tracks will indicate that we are taking a course that is directly opposite. W-h-e-w! It is a shrewd game."

The work was finished by three in the afternoon, and after every trace of the halt had been removed from the rock, they prepared to depart.

Just as they were about to mount, Hatfield's men, who had followed with but little rest, came riding down the stream. Marian and her father were overjoyed to observe that the party was unaccompanied by Esther. They noticed that Bill and Hatfield, whose arm was in a sling, conferred apart for some

time, and the chief seemed greatly annoyed at what was communicated by his lieutenant.

But no time was wasted in useless regrets, and the Bloodsuckers now resumed their journey, leaving Hatfield's party occupying the spot where they themselves had been for the past few hours. The company left behind was swelled by the addition of ten more men taken from the main body, thus leaving the numbers about equally divided. These men, Marian learned from her father, were probably to be used for the purpose of leading their pursuers off the track.

"It is the sharpest trick I ever saw," said the old man, ruefully, "and it will mislead the best trail-finder in America."

During the afternoon Marian had an opportunity to speak to Persimmon Bill, and she took advantage of the chance to tell him how glad she was that he had missed her sister.

The chief glared at her an instant, and then, with his old, reckless laugh, exclaimed:

"Never you mind, my pretty one! I have not given up the chase even yet. When I undertake any task, I always finish it before I cease trying. Your sister will yet be mine. I have sworn it, and it must be so."

Their course was a little south of west, and they traveled in a very leisurely fashion, stopping at sundown and resting all night, which was something new, and indicated that there was no longer any hurry.

Shortly after Persimmon Bill and his party had appeared over the western bank of the river, Hatfield's followers toiled up the eastern side, and took a course which led to the south-east.

The reader will please bear in mind the relative directions taken by these two divisions of the main force, as a complete understanding of the next chapter depends upon the course suggested.

There was but one thing about the party commanded by Hatfield which claimed particular attention. From a small aperture in a key, suspended over the side of one of the horses, poured a slender stream of gunpowder.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE MORNING.

Dan, Ryan, and Esther were up betimes. After a hasty and not gluttonous repast upon what was left of the bacon, the scout, accompanied by his pet, started over to camp, for the purpose of getting what supplies he could find, and also to procure all possible information as to the movements of the Blood-suckers.

Shortly after sunrise he returned with four horses and a considerable amount of bacon and other eatables, together with arms, ammunition, and blankets in abundance. The animals he had found at different points, wandering aimlessly about. One of them he loaded with such supplies as he could pick up among the ruins of the camp, while to the others he fastened saddles. The side-saddle belonging to Esther he found among the other articles strewn about, and she was glad enough to learn that one, at least, of the discomforts of her prospective journey was to be removed.

Ryan had, in addition to his other work, examined the trail left by the retreating band, and found everything just as Robinson had represented to Esther. He hardly knew whether to be pleased or mortified at the discovery, because it conflicted somewhat with his own expressed ideas of the lack of faith shown by the late robber. But he was satisfied to remain silent and trust to the future to prove his theory, and therefore made no further comment.

They were soon mounted and away, intersecting the trail of the fugitive robbers some miles distant. Their horses were comparatively fresh, and during the day they made good headway, stopping only long enough to lunch at noon, and then pressing straight forward.

At night, however, they rested nearly nine hours, and were on the march again early the following morning. About five in the afternoon they reached the edge of the river where the robbers had entered the water. As darkness was coming on rapidly they did not go farther that day, because it would have been difficult in the uncertain light to discover where the party in advance had left the water.

But as soon as the first faint streaks of dawn showed themselves upon the horizon they resumed their journey, and at about ten o'clock they reached the flat rock where Persimmon Bill's men had changed the shoes on their horses.

Vixen, who had been trotting along the bank of the river, far in advance of her master, was the first to find the trail where it came up out of the water, and she stood sounding her weird signal until the three friends came up.

Thus far the trail of the robbers had led due west. What, then, was the surprise of the pursuers to observe that on the bank of the river it suddenly turned back again toward the rising sun.

"They hev doubled on us, an' no mistake," said Ryan, with a rueful expression. "Ef we'd only a knowed it we might hev cut acrost an' headed 'em off. But ez it is, I can't see any use o' wastin' time repinin' over our sorrers. Ef we're goin' to ketch 'em we must be at it."

While the party stood talking on the bank of the

stream they had failed to see that Vixen was no longer with them. But as the scout finished speaking they heard her familiar cry. She was now on the opposite side of the river. Observing by her actions that she had made some new discovery, Ryan crossed to where she stood, over the reversed trail.

"Hello!" he exclaimed; "why, the cusses hev ben j'ined by another gang from the west'ard Great snakes! ef we keep on this way, we'll hev to tackle an army afore long."

As may readily be surmised, the scout and his friends were not particular in examining the trail, but started off at once upon the false scent so cunningly planned to lead them astray.

Vixen showed great unwillingness to go in that direction, and more than once her master, who placed great reliance in her, was tempted to stop and go back. But he reflected that he must be right in following such a plainly laid trail, and kept ahead.

It was noon the next day when the party discovered that their fugitives were still doubling upon them. The tracks, which had started in a southeasterly direction, swung around in an immense semicircle to the northward, finally leading back and across the river. Then a similar semicircle led to the westward, and back again to the river-bank, some miles below the big rock, thus making an enormous and complete ring around that center.

The scout and his friends kept right on over the pathway.

"We kin travel ez long ez they kin," he observed, philosophically, "an' ef we leave the track now, ten to one we won't ketch it agin."

Upon reaching the river the second time the trail

led up to the bank of the stream. The party had been three whole days completing the circle, and it was nearly dusk when they came in sight of the big flat rock again.

"Wasted time!" said Dan, in tones which showed his discontent. "Halloa! what's that?"

With his index finger he pointed toward a white placard fastened upon a pole which was erected in a crevice upon the rock. The friends spurred their horses out into the stream. In a few moments they were where they could read the inscription traced in black letters upon the paper. The legend ran thus:

"THIS IS A HOT COUNTRY!
LOOK OUT FOR FIRE!
COMPLIMENTS OF PERSIMMON BILL."

"What does it mean?" asked the detective, somewhat puzzled by the enigmatic words.

Just then a flash of light illuminated the air. Looking in the direction from which it came, they saw that there was a great blaze, which spread in every direction with the rapidity of lightning. Their eyes sprang from one point of the compass to the other, but only to be met at every turn by the same yellow light.

"Again I say, what does it mean?" were Dan's words, as his cheek turned a shade paler. Ryan was very quiet, but his countenance was as white as death.

Vixen stood erect an instant, and then thrust her muzzle into the air with a wild and mournful scream.

Esther, as pale as Sycamore Dan, waited eagerly for the scout's words of explanation.

They came, scarcely louder than a whisper, but so distinct that they were graven upon the hearts of his hearers for years afterward:

"The perrairie is afire on every side. We are trapped in a livin' wall o' flame."

There was a moment of dreadful silence. Then Dan spoke.

"God help us, then," he said, "for there is no escape."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BURNING PRAIRIE.

The chances for life seemed small indeed. On every hand the flames sprang into the air, shooting long forked tongues toward the heavens, as if a million fiery and gigantic serpents were approaching with bodies erect and eyeballs glaring wildly.

It was a grand, and yet an awful scene. Covering a vast area, around which the fire drew a wide ring, with no apparent break in the infolding ribbon of flame, the spectacle was one which might readily strike terror to the hearts of those who were prisoners within the seething circle.

The three friends did not remain long inactive. To have stood still and awaited the oncoming destroyer would have been madness. But what was to be done? Was there no outlet? The prospect was dark and forbidding.

The depressing sentence spoken by Sycamore Dan had deep effect on all of them. Yet it was only temporary. The loud roar of the flames could be heard in the distance, like the rumbling voice of approaching thunder. It came booming over them like the grim voice of some spectral monster, traveling toward them with wide-open jaws and threatening mien.

"I see it all!" cried Esther. "We have been enticed to our death. While we were following the trail laid down for us, we were cutting ourselves off from the only chance of escape."

"I reckon ye've hit the nail on the head, Miss Esther," observed Ryan, with the same dread calmness in voice and manner.

Sycamore Dan was the next to speak.

"Is there no possible relief from our terrible position?"

"Yes," replied the scout. "There is just one *possible* chance."

"Why not take to the water?" was Esther's suggestion.

"It ain't the flames we need be afraid of," responded Ryan. "But inside twenty minnits thar'll be a shower o' sparks round hyar thicker nor any rain-storm ye ever see. Them's what we must look out for. An' ez we can't live with our heads under water, why thet would be a useless trick."

"What then is the only chance you speak of. How shall we conquer the flames?"

"We must fight fire with fire. Thet is our last show fer life."

"Well, then, let us be about it. How shall we begin?"

"Ye hev noticed, p'raps, thet fer a couple o' hundred feet each side o' this stream, the grass and bushes is so green thet they won't burn. Wal, ye must go to t'other side o' thet green strip, an' tech off the dry stuff. It will burn to'rd them flames comin', an' meet 'em half way, so thet ther'll be a clean sweep, an' yet we will be free from the result of it. See?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"Then be off. You, Dan, take the t'other shore, an' I'll tackle this one. Esther'll please roost hyer till we come back."

All the talk and cogitation had not consumed five

minutes; and in an additional period of equal length the two men had started their opposing fires. The theory that great flames generate rapid currents of air which blow in the direction taken by their creators, thus urging the devastating element faster and faster upon its course, has long been accepted as true. The watchers, who gazed anxiously at the work of their hands, their hopes rising as each tongue of fire shot upward, were able to bear witness to the correctness of the proposition which has since become an established fact in science.

They could see the approaching column of fire, whirling along toward them, rolling over and over like a huge red-crested billow propelled by some unseen force. Between it and themselves was rising with ever increasing strength the flame they had kindled. It went out to meet the oncoming foe, like a small army, recruiting its strength as it traveled, marching to oppose an arrogant invading force. And like the rulers who stay behind in times of war, to guide and instruct the bearers of their arms, watching anxiously for the result, were those three friends, who with throbbing hearts and distended eyes stood in mid-stream, gazing fixedly at the battle of flame.

The defensive fire, as it gathered power, also generated a strong breeze which blew in direct antagonism to the one created by the opposing flames. Thus each breeze, freighted with its load of burning coals, caught and checked the sparks of the other, so that as the creeping skirmish lines approached each other, reaching out to meet and do battle with their foes, the scene became one of intense grandeur.

As far as the eye could reach, to the east, west, south, and north, there was a wall of flying particles

heated to a brilliant hue. Tossed like feathers upon the tempest, they flashed through the air, casting reflections of rare and prismatic beauty. The two battling currents of air, as they came together, caught and sucked up the burning fragments with irresistible force. Long and gaunt-looking branches of dead trees; great bunches of dried grass; little clumps of sage-brush; slender, spear-like reeds, which had grown, bloomed, and faded in the hollows; all were torn from the spot on which they chanced to lie, and tossed upward, surrounded with flame. It was a scene not witnessed once in a century.

The roar of the contending elements now became deafening. The air, too, was freighted with the unwholesome odor of burning vegetable matter. A dull, dry heat settled down upon the spot where the besieged party stood.

But the danger had passed, and each mentally thanked Heaven for having preserved them from the danger which threatened.

The wall of burning fragments began to diminish in height. It was soon filled with great black gaps, beyond which the heavy mantle of night shot gloomily in. Across these increasing breaches in the once solid chain, darted at distant intervals, single objects, bright with fire. They looked in that gloomy atmosphere like grand pyrotechnic displays. The perils over, the friends began to realize the rare beauty of the scene around them. But they had little time to comment upon its many points of attractiveness.

Since fires had been kindled by Ryan and Dan, the scout had been silent to an unwonted degree. His

mind had gone back to the problem of overtaking the Bloodsuckers.

It was evident to him that the flames had been kindled by the pursued, with a double purpose. They would, if they succeeded, both obliterate the trail and destroy the pursuers. The scheme had been well planned and neatly executed, but it had failed. What had to be done next? And why had the trail of the robbers taken such a circuitous course? Surely, with their force they could have whipped all that was left of the hunting party. Why then had Persimmon Bill taken such pains to throw them off the scent?

Another thing the scout could not quite understand. That was the trail crossing the river from the westward. On the whole, Ryan was pretty badly muddled.

"Well," he muttered, "I'll sleep on it to-night, an' in the mornin' I may be able to hit a leetle nigher the truth nor I hev yet."

The friends ate a hearty supper, and were soon wrapped in heavy slumber, while Vixen assumed her old position as sentry.

It was very nearly daylight when they were awakened by a signal from the wild-cat.

Listening intently they could hear sounds made by a horse approaching rapidly. Who the rider could be, and why he should be traveling alone in such evident haste across the seared and blackened prairie, they could not imagine. The horse came nearer and nearer at a full run.

Ryan looked at Vixen. If it was an enemy, she would be sure to indicate as much by growling and showing other signs of displeasure. She seemed to

possess the faculty of scenting a foe at long distance.

Would she show wrath or pleasure now?

Could he believe his eyes? Was it possible that he had a friend in this wilderness? If Vixen was to be relied upon, that was the exact truth. For, instead of expressing anger, she actually bounded into the air with apparent delight.

Closer and closer came the rider at his reckless pace. It was time to check his career, ere he should dash straight over them.

"Halt! Who goes there?" cried Ryan, in commanding tones.

The horse reared to its haunches almost against the hunter's form. The animal was covered with foam, its eyes were dilated with excitement and fatigue, and its nostrils trembled as the breath came and went in short, quick throbs.

"From the back of the tired hired horse came an answer to the challenge.

"If you are, as I suspect, Posey Ryan, Sycamore Dan, and Esther Harper, I am a friend."

It was the voice of Jack Robinson.

"Ye've guessed it, young feller. But what d'ye want?"

"Listen and you shall hear."

The scout and his friends bent their heads attentively, but at the same time kept their eyes in full range of the man who had just arrived.

Sounds fell upon their ears at once. More horsemen were approaching in the distance.

"Well," said Dan, after he had identified the noises, "what are we to learn from that?"

"You may learn that four of Persimmon Bill's gang are following on my trail. You may learn that I am hunted like a dog, for trying to save you from

the flames. You may learn that I have risked all and lost all for you!"

Until that moment Ryan had firmly believed that when he met Robinson, one or the other of them must die. But now he found that his feeling toward the Bloodsucker was not altogether vengeful. He was a man who would help friend or foe in time of danger, and, after all, it had not been directly proved that Robinson was a traitor. Still he by no means acknowledged that his former estimate of the man had been wholly incorrect. But there was little doubt that danger threatened them all alike. He would certainly help to avert that, at all events.

"Wal, Mister Robinson," he began, "I don't know for sartin that what ye say is true, nor I don't know that it ain't. But jest now we're all in the nine-hole, an' ef nothin' happens, me an' my pardner will help pull ye through. Ef ther's anythin' to be said arterwards, why we'll say it."

It grew rapidly lighter, until in a very few minutes it was possible to see for some distance in every direction. The three men moved forward a few paces, and secreted themselves behind a clump of bushes, situated upon the crest of a little knoll.

The horses of the pursuing Bloodsuckers soon came in sight, and in a very few moments were in easy range.

"Take keerful aim," said Ryan, "an' when I give the word, blaze away."

The men were now not more than a hundred yards away—seventy-five—fifty.

"Fire!"

The report of the three rifles was simultaneous. When the thin cloud of blue smoke lifted, three of the saddles of the Bloodsuckers were empty, and the

frightened horses were running wildly over the prairie.

The fourth rider, quite unscathed, checked his animal as quickly as possible, and turned to fly.

But in the meantime Dan had reloaded his rifle, and before the horse had made three jumps his rider rolled heavily upon the ground, stone dead, with an ounce of lead in his brain.

The work had been done well and quickly.

"Now then," said Ryan, coolly, as he rolled over so as to face Robinson; "now then we'll listen to what ye've got to say."

"I agree at once," responded the man. "But as the story is interesting to all of us, I should like to have the young lady hear it also."

"Sartin," observed the scout. "That's a good idee. So let's go back to camp."

In five minutes they were seated about the fire, and Robinson was telling his story.

"It isn't a very long yarn," said he, "but what there is of it is true. The young lady has, no doubt, told you all there was to tell about the little aid I was able to grant her. Of course when the gang, headed by that devil Hatfield, came up I knew it was no use for me to try and do battle against so many, and therefore I was obliged to use my cunning in drawing them off the scent. In this scheme I was entirely successful, and I did not learn until nightfall, after I had been leading them away for three or four hours, of your imprisonment by Hatfield. It disturbed me more than you can guess, because I knew you would think that was my work. However, I did not fear for your ultimate safety, because I had directed Miss Esther how to find you,

and I knew that I could trust fully to her shrewdness and tact.

"Well, we soon struck the main trail, and followed it to this point, where we overtook the rest of the gang. The chief was mighty mad when he found that we had missed what we were sent for. Indeed he was so much put out with Hatfield, who had been sent in charge of our party, that he immediately assigned him to do additional duty in spite of the fact that the infernal coward was badly wounded, and was nearly crazy to go along with the young woman and her father.

"By the way, it was I who wounded Hatfield—quite accidentally, you know—and as I was the only one in the party who knew anything about medicine, I also had to dress his wound two or three times a day. I bound it up in herbs regularly, but owing to some oversight one of the doses I plastered on contained some foreign substance which has caused his shoulder to swell so you couldn't get it into a bushel basket. Shouldn't wonder if he died from it," continued the ex-robber, with a smile of calm and supreme satisfaction.

"Well this extra duty assigned to our party was to make a wide circle to the east and north, so as to make pursuers think we had doubled on them; for the chief was sure we should be followed. And so we left the main party here on this rock."

"What become of 'em?" asked Ryan.

"They went West."

"But how's thet? The trail p'ints east'ard."

"I know it does, but then, you see, the horses' shoes were reversed upon their feet."

"Thunder!" exclaimed the scout, in the greatest astonishment.

"Impossible!" said Dan in much the same tone.

"Is it? Just wait here a second."

Robinson rose, and waded out into the stream. He soon returned with three or four flat rocks, which he lifted from the bed of the river.

"See if there are not marks of fire on those," he said. "And if that don't convince you I'll bring every stone that was used in the forge."

The look of doubt on Ryan's face passed quickly away, and was replaced by one that was half wonder, half chagrin.

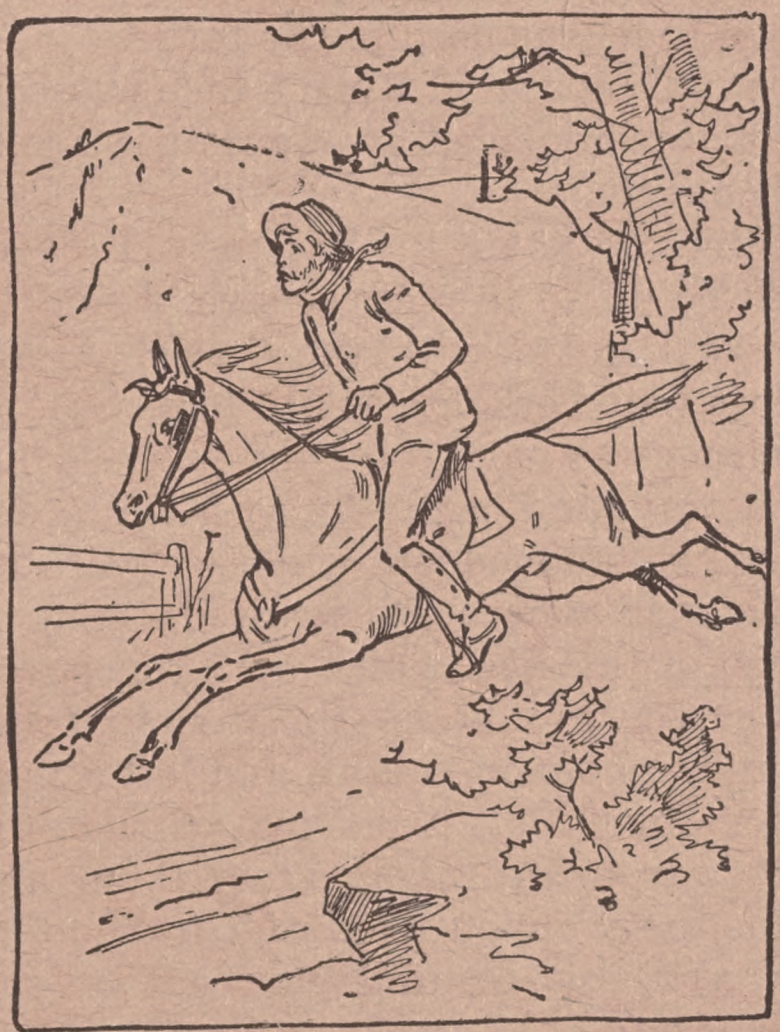
"Outwitted, by hokey! Wal, may I be everlastingly chawed up, ef I ever see sich a smart trick in my life. Wal, go on with the music. Gosh! what a peart cuss that Persimmon Bill must be!"

"This circle was partly for the purpose of leading pursuers astray, and partly to lay a train of powder. That was to be touched off when we were sure that we had our men where we wanted them. Well, I had charge of the keg which held the powder, and as I knew you would be the first to follow us, I plugged up the hole one night, and left a gap nearly ten miles wide without a particle of the stuff in it. My object was to get away from them and warn you in time to save you from the terrible death in store for you, by leading you out of the circle through this gap.

"But, unfortunately for me, Hatfield owed me a grudge, and watched me mighty close. After the trail was laid, he took all but five of us, who were left to fire the powder, and went to join the chief. On the day when we crossed your trail the last time, and knew you were here, it was determined to touch off the train. I was very tired from my past exertions, and so fell asleep. I had horrible dreams, and

it appears that I also talked in my slumber, for I waked up suddenly to find myself tied hand and foot, while my companions stood about determining what should be done with me.

"It was in vain that I protested my innocence. They refused to believe me, and I was obliged to remain securely bound. During all that long after-



ROBINSON ESCAPING FROM PERSIMMON BILL'S GANG.

noon I suffered agonies. I was afraid you would be caught in the flames and burned, yet I could not help you. The men had decided to carry me to the chief and tell him about me. That meant death, and I knew it. Just at dark the train was lighted on both sides of the river. Oh, Heaven! what I endured while the fire was blazing, you do not know!

"My captors went to sleep while the terrible flames still raged. During the night I succeeded in slipping the cords which bound me down, and, mounted upon my horse, I rode away. They awoke, and followed —and you know the rest."

Ryan's confidence was completely restored. He held out his hand, and his voice trembled a little as he said:

"I hev doubted ye, Jack, an' I was a mighty mean galoot to do it. Thar's my hand, an' ef I ever kin sarve ye in any way, don't ye hesitate one single doggoned instant to tell me of it."

The two clasped hands fervently, after which the other friends signified the non-abatement of their confidence in the same manner.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WORKING IN EARNEST.

If you had seen the party two hours later you would never in the world have recognized them as the same people who had sat in consultation beside the fire early in the morning. Robinson was the only member of the company who was unchanged in appearance. Sycamore Dan was the most thoroughly disguised of the three others.

His light hair was dyed to a deep and shining black, his eyebrows were heavily colored, and his skin was darkened to a deep yellow hue. In contrast to these points of make up, his eyes showed with peculiar brilliancy. His whole appearance was odd to a striking degree.

Ryan had been almost as completely metamorphosed. Previously his complexion was dark, and his hair and mustache were of a rich brown color. By some mysterious process his hair had undergone a sudden and complete change of hue.

It was now so light as to be almost straw-colored. His mustache had disappeared, and his eyebrows had also given way to the influence of the magic dye.

Esther was as thoroughly disguised as either of the others. Her splendid hair was shorn to a length compatible with the sex she represented, and she was clothed in a boy's costume, hastily altered to suit her figure. The clothes had originally belonged to one of the dead Bloodsuckers, and the girl shud-

dered involuntarily when she donned them. Her skin, like Dan's, had been colored to a very dark hue, if anything a trifle darker than the detective's was.

When the finishing touch had been added to her disguise, she looked very much like a plump lad of fourteen years or thereabouts, and in order to make the assumption perfect, there was only needed a little schooling in male habits of locomotion.

"How on earth do you make these dyes?" asked Dan, turning with an inquiring look toward Robinson, in the midst of the operation which had made the change.

"It is very simple. The yellow I make by boiling walnuts, as you have seen, and then adding to the liquid a small piece of gamboge, which I allow to dissolve. For the black I use galls and black lead, such as pencils are made of. There is a mine of this latter not many miles from here. You see my list of ingredients is not very large."

"So I observe. But at the same time there is an elegant sufficiency. Now, then, are we all ready?"

As Dan tossed Esther lightly upon the saddle in the attitude appropriate to her newly donned costume, he noticed that she sat with an ease and grace which seemed to indicate that it was not the first time she had ridden horseback in that fashion. However, without passing useless comments, he satisfied himself with the entirely correct reflection that girls very frequently, in the privacy of company confined to their own sex, do many strange things.

When all was in readiness for the start the strange party put spurs to their horses, and were soon loping away over the hills in a direction almost straight west.

"So you say, Jack, that the journey by this route is about two days distant?"

"Just about that. By the route taken by the chief it is a day longer. So, you see, we shall arrive at the rendezvous at about the same time as his party, or very little later."

"Wal," put in Ryan, "we can't get thar too soon to suit me; ye kin bet on thet."

They made good headway during the day, and when darkness arrived had covered fully half the distance between their starting point and destination.

They had not gone far upon their journey next day when they saw, some distance ahead of them, a large body of men coming in their direction.

"By George!" ejaculated Robinson. "It's some of the boys, as sure as a gun! Are we all up in our parts?"

"You bet we are!" responded Ryan.

The ex-robber began to signal to the coming party, and soon the two forces had joined. The newcomers were headed by Hatfield, who was bandaged profusely, and scowled with evident anger. "Halloa, Dick!" cried Robinson. "Where are you going with all these boys?"

"To Fort Hays, —— it!" responded Hatfield, with a series of vile curses. "The chief is so devilish mad because we failed to get the girl, that he has ordered me to the fort to head her off and bring her back. He is down on me to that extent that, well as he knows I want to stay where that girl is—well as he knows I am too ill to travel in safety, he insists on sending me away on every expedition."

Hatfield wound up his list of complaints with another series of fearful imprecations, and then, ap-

parently noticing for the first time the presence of strangers, he exclaimed:

"Why, who have we here?"

"They are some friends," Robinson replied, with a meaning wink, "with whom our party fell in after the big fire on the prairie. The same night we were all attacked by Indians, and—well, you see all that is left of the original party."

"What! four of the boys killed?"

"That's exactly it. We have traveled together since then. These gentlemen are going West. The thick, heavy-set one is Mr. Alvord, a large stock raiser, from Texas. He is hunting for a place to locate a big cattle-ranch around here somewhere. The two others are Tom Dupont and his son Jack. The father is Mr. Alford's chief drover. They are all fond of a social bowl and a game of 'draw,' and so I thought it would be a good idea to introduce them to our employer, especially as they are likely, in case they settle in this vicinity, to know each other more intimately."

Again Robinson and Hatfield exchanged glances. This time, however, the latter's expression was one of enjoyment of the joke his supposed friend had uttered. He went over and shook hands with the three strangers, saying he was "sure his employer would make their stay under his roof a pleasant one."

The two bodies of men then parted company, each to resume their journey, and each to chuckle over the fool's errand the other was going on.

"It's the best thing in the world for us," said Robinson, when they were once out of ear-shot, "that the expedition has started."

"Why so?" asked Esther.

"Because it don't leave more than four men about the place—that is, four besides the chief."

"Then we shall have an easier time to catch our man," observed Dan, with a smile.

"But still," added Ryan, with a dubious shake of his head; "the job ain't no soft snap, for I hev allers heerd thet Persim William was a thunderin' hard man to get away with. I'd like to see him. I've had many a skrimmage with his men, but never yet had a chance to tackle the boss himself."

"Well, if we get over the ground as fast as we have been doing for the past day, your desire will be gratified ere the sun goes down to-night."

Robinson's prophecy proved to be correct, for, just as the god of day leaned toward the high crest of mountains to the westward, the horses loped over the brow of a sharp hill, full in sight of a large log house situated in a picturesque hollow. Two men stood near the door-way, and a third sat close at hand, under the shade of a large tree. A moss-bound stream flowed a few yards in the rear of the dwelling.

As they approached, the man who sat beneath the tree rose and scanned them closely. They were soon near enough to distinguish features, and the proprietor of the place, as soon as he was satisfied of the identity of those approaching, resumed his seat.

Dan instantly recognized Bill Creighton, the man he had come so far to seek. His fingers thrilled with a strange desire to clutch his enemy by the throat, but choked back the sensation and retained his composure.

As soon as Ryan saw the stranger, he started violently, and he turned a trifle paler. The blood rushed to his eyes, turning the whites to a dull red color.

He was profoundly agitated, and his partner noticed the change that had come over him. But there was no time for explanations.

Robinson called his chief aside, and spoke a few words in his ear, telling him the same story he had told Dick Hatfield about the identity of the men who accompanied him. After that they were introduced, and the chief of the Bloodsuckers received them cordially.

When his eye met Ryan's gaze it lingered there a minute, as if in doubt whether the countenance was not more or less familiar to him. But it was only a momentary hesitation. The party entered the house, and had soon gathered about the supper table. All ate with relish, and the new-comers played their parts like old stagers, giving no look or sign that was likely to betray them.

They lingered long at supper. When at last they arose, their host conducted them into an inner apartment. The whole house was furnished roughly, and with an eye to comfort rather than beauty. In the room which they entered after supper there were a few wooden chairs and a table. At one end of the place were some scuttle doors, thrown back so as to show a flight of stairs leading down into a dark cellar.

"This," said the proprietor, "is my lounging room. By keeping those doors open the apartment is rendered cool and pleasant the year round. Just sit in that chair, Mr. Alford, close to the opening, and see how you will enjoy the draught. When you build in this vicinity you really must have a place like it."

Ryan acknowledged, absently, that the air from the aperture was quite comfortable in distinction to the hot, close room.

"Doctor Delmay," as Robinson had introduced Persimmon Bill, was very hospitable. He had sent Robinson, when they left the table, to attend to some matters at the stable, and he had not yet returned. But two of the other men accompanied the guests into the apartment where pipes and a bowl of punch were produced, and they prepared to spend a jolly evening.

Ryan sat close beside the open scuttle doors, with his head on his hand, apparently deep in thought. Ever since he had met Persimmon Bill he seemed to be actuated by some strange emotion which Dan could not account for. The host noticed it too, for, turning to his guest, he said:

"You are silent this evening, Mr. Alford. Pray tell me is anything wrong? Are you ill?"

"No," replied Ryan. "I ain't ill, but I feel durned cur'us to-night."

Then a sudden thought seemed to strike him:

"When I feel ez I do to-night I allers want to tell my story. It's an interestin' one, an' ef ye think it wuth while, I'll spin it off now. What d'ye say?"

"Certainly, my dear sir. We should be delighted. Let us have it, by all means."

This was something new to Dan. He had often thought he should like to hear the life of his friend and partner, and here was his opportunity. But why did Ryan choose this time to tell it?"

In less than ten minutes he had found out why, and had cause to regret it.

CHAPTER XIX.

POSEY RYAN'S STORY.

"When I war a boy," began the scout, "I lived in the north'ard part o' York State. My dad handed in his chips when I war an infant, leaving my ma, my sister, an' myself behind him. Fort'nitly he left us enough rocks so's we could get along well enough 'thout stintin' ourselves. We lived alone some miles from the nearest village. Tharfore thar wa'n't nothin' perticallally rushin' 'bout the life we led. Ez fer me, I used to think a derned sight more o' my fishrod an' gun nor I did o' books, an' spent tarnal near all my time among the hills away from the sight o' men. I liked the woods an' the mounting air, but doggoned ef I *did* like strangers.

"Sister Kate was a great hand to sketch with a pencil. Doggoned ef she couldn't make han'somer picters outen nothin' at all, 'cept a hunk o' charcoal an' a slab o' white paper, nor ever I see. She war jest litenin', she war. Wal, we got along nice an' easy like, never interferin' with nobody, an' never bein' interfered with, till it come along one summer, when all our troubles began.

"One bright day in June I took my old shootin' iron an' went off into the woods a huntin' game. I war gone two days, an' when I got back an' walked into the house, thar sot a stranger. He war a fine-looking chap, well built, an' well dressed. It appears thet he hed come to the house durin' my absence, an' axed to be took to board for a week. He hed

come up, he sed, for a leetle huntin' an' fishin'. He hed mighty winning ways about him, an' palavered over the wimmen folks until they hed consented to take him in. "I didn't like it very well, but I made the best of it, an' next day we went fishin' together. It war the same way for day arter day, an' week arter week, until the time stretched out to more nor a month. Arter thet he dropped goin' with me part o' the time, an' stuck to the house. He staid well-nigh onto another month, an' then, mighty sudden, one day while I war away huntin' he skipped out, an' went back to whar he kem from. Arter he war gone Sister Kate mourned an' pined for him like she would die, an' I'll take my solemn oath thet a short time arterward we discovered thet she hed ben betrayed.

"The blow killed my mother, who died within a week of a broken heart. An' my sister, who hedn't ontil then fully realized what it all meant, one day, when I war away from the house, left a note on the table, sayin' good-by, an' tellin' how she loved me too well to stay thar an' disgrace me. Next day we foun' her dead body in the river.

"From thet day till this I hain't seen the low-lived scoundrel what done thet thing. But to-day I hev seen him. Frens, his name is Bill Creighton!"

The company had not time to recover from their astonishment at the announcement, for at the instant his name was spoken Persimmon Bill uttered a loud oath, and bounding from his chair, threw himself upon Ryan with all his force.

The scout was just rising from his seat, and so was taken at a decided disadvantage. Unbalanced by the shock, he fell backward through the open scuttle doors into the black and yawning cellar. The

doors came together with a loud crash, and he was a prisoner.

As he crawled, half stunned, to his feet, he heard a brief scuffle without, and then all was still.

He next groped his way up the steps and tried the doors. They were as immovable as a granite rock, and he was a prisoner. The darkness surrounding him was intensely black. It was so heavy that he could almost feel it. The air was thick and oppressive. There was no longer a free draught through the confined chamber. In place of the crisp, cold breeze, the close atmosphere became damp and clammy.

Ryan sat down upon the wooden steps to think. How large was his cell? Was there another outlet? If not, where did the current of air come from? There must be. He would go down the steps and see.

He rose, and stepped cautiously down. His feet touched the floor. Heavens! There was a covering of water upon it several inches deep!

He remembered that when he first entered the apartment it was perfectly dry. What, then, did this mean? Horror! The solution flashed upon him. The subterranean passage through which the air had formerly come was now filled with running water. It was only a question of time when the place would be filled. And then——

He shuddered at the thought. After an instant he rushed wildly up the stairs and pounded upon the doors until he had laid his knuckles bare to the bone. It was useless; the barrier stood firm. Then he went down again. The water was above the first stair, and creeping upward. He returned, and sat upon the upper plank. It seemed but an instant when the water touched his feet. Then it crept slowly toward

his knees. The air became closer and more confined as the space occupied by atmosphere grew smaller.

The water was above his waist as he stood upon his feet, with his head touching the ceiling. Cold perspiration started out upon his forehead, and rolled down upon his face in torrents.

Posey Ryan was not a coward, and had faced death in many forms; but the thought of drowning slowly



THE WATER WAS ABOVE HIS WAIST AS HE STOOD UPON HIS FEET.

gave him the keenest torture. It was a terrible condition to be placed in.

He could feel the wavelets lapping about his chin. In five minutes it would be too late to save him. He could not raise his head higher. Already it was pressed close against the flooring above. The flood advanced. Had Heaven indeed deserted him?

A shot was heard outside; then another.

Hark! Footsteps were approaching. Then voices were heard. It was Persimmon Bill who spoke.

"You see," he was saying, calmly, "there is no one here."

There was another sound then. It was the half-whining cry of Vixen. She had scented him through the door. Would the searchers outside see her? He could not cry out; he could not utter the slightest sound. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

The footsteps retreated.

Vixen was goaded to madness. She uttered a wild scream of anguish.

At last the eyes were attracted to her, and Robinson's voice cried out:

"Great Heaven! The cellar! Quick, or it may be too late!

There was a hurried sound of moving bars, a rush of many waters, and Posey Ryan knew no more.

CHAPTER XX.

THE LION CAGED.

When the scout opened his eyes again, he was high and dry upon a table, surrounded by anxious faces.

At his feet stood Sycamore Dan and Esther, while Robinson was close beside him. Vixen was stretched at full length upon his chest, looking down into his face with an expression which indicated very plainly her joy at his recovery.

Slowly the ideas crept back, and he recalled the fearful agony he had passed through. It seemed like a black dream, too hideous to be real. He could not fully realize the fact, until reassured by his friends.

"How did it happen?" he asked, as soon as he could articulate.

"Why, it's clear enough to us," replied Robinson, with a smile.

"Yas, p'raps it is," added the scout. "But it ain't so clear to me. S'posin' ye tell me 'bout it. What in thunder is that cellar, anyhow!?"

"That was built by the chief's orders after the Bloodsuckers left on their journey in which I took part. Therefore I knew nothing of it until just now. I don't know whether he was actuated by the thought that some occasion like this might arise or not. But I reckon he was, for the place was mighty skillfully contrived. There was one trench which opened into it, through which the water could be let in by simply pulling a cord, which lifted a gate on

the bank of the stream behind the house. Thus the cellar could be filled up at will. Then, after the water had remained long enough to accomplish the purpose of the chief, by pulling another cord he could lift a second gate in the cellar itself, which connected with an underground passage that would conduct the flood back to the river at a point half a mile below here. So, you see, if anybody disappeared suddenly in the house, his body might be readily disposed of, and nobody the wiser."

Ryan shuddered at the possibility. But his thoughts soon wandered to other subjects.

"How does it happen that ye ain't all took prisoners?"

"Well," replied Sycamore Dan, "after you were tossed into the cellar, or rather at the very moment, we were both attacked by the remaining scoundrels, and in less than ten seconds were bound, gagged, and taken away. I will say that those fellows did their work up in mighty quick shape. We were thrown into a dark room, and left alone with our reflections, which, as you may easily imagine, were not of a very pleasant character.

"We had been there perhaps half an hour, when we heard ten or twelve shots, some loud yelling, and then, almost before we knew it, the door was burst in, and we were liberated.

"As soon as we got out into the light I saw that the new arrivals were none other than the remnants of the hunting party, who had, after their disastrous battle with the Bloodsuckers, reorganized and equipped themselves without loss of time for the purpose of following their enemies and avenging the loss of their companions. Why, even as you were

tossed into the cellar-way, they were surrounding the house.

"Robinson, who was the only one about this place, stationed outside the house, saw them coming, and immediately volunteered to lead them.

"When he entered, followed by eight or ten of the others, you and Esther and myself were already secured. The invaders met Persimmon Bill in the hall, backed by his three subordinates. There was a brief but desperate fight, during which the three assistants were killed, and Bill himself retired to an inner chamber, where he locked himself in and swore he would kill the first man who entered.

"Robinson, knowing my desire to capture the villain with my own hands, and guessing immediately where I was confined, came with great haste to liberate me, first having stationed his followers before the door.

"What was his surprise to find that you were no longer with us? Before we could explain he led the way to the door of the chief's room. Of course, we didn't imagine the actual condition of your confinement. If we had, even in the remotest way, we should, of course, have come at once to your rescue, and let the matter of catching Bill rest until afterward. But we supposed, of course, that the cellar was merely what it looked, a dry excavation, which might be used as a prison, nothing more.

"As it was, I had determined to take Persimmon Bill, then and there. So I knocked on the door. There was no answer, and I knocked again.

" 'What do you want?' came from within.

" 'I want to come in,' said I.

" 'Are you armed?'

" 'No.'

"'Then you had better stay where you are.'

"'I shall do no such thing. I am coming into that room.'

"'You will come in at your peril.'

"'Nevertheless I shall do so,' I replied, and putting my shoulder to the door, I burst it in.

"As it fell with a crash, a bullet whizzed past my head and buried itself in the wall. I continued to go forward. Bill Creighton stood on the other side of the room, with his smoking revolver in his hand. I had neither my pistols nor my knife with me. He was very pale, and very determined. A second time he raised his weapon and glanced along the barrel. I did not flinch. He held his pistol in that position an instant, and then let it fall to his side.

"'You are a brave man,' he said.

"'Possibly,' was all the reply I gave him.

"'What do you want?'

"'I want you.'

"Again the revolver came up, hesitated, and went back.

"'Who are you?'

"'Don't you know me?'

"'It seems as if I did—and yet——'

"'My name is Dan Burdette. I want you.'

"By Jove, Ryan, if you had seen the look that came over his face! He hesitated no longer, but dropped his pistol on the floor and came forward, with his hands outstretched to receive the 'bracelets.' I had them with me, and it would be safe to bet that I didn't waste any time in putting them on him. When that was done he said:

"'You are the only man on the face of this earth that I would give under to. But I know you too well from experience to resist. Your life is charmed.'

"Just then Robinson recalled you to our memory, and he started down to this room, where we told him you were, with the intention of finding you. Bill Creighton, with hands heavily ironed, came with him. Robinson, of course, knew nothing about the cellar, and had it not been for Vixen, Bill would undoubtedly have led him off the scent.

"Well, Creighton had just begun to get over the surprise of meeting me here, and no doubt was sorry he had given up so easily, for, when Robinson was fishing you out of the cellar he made a sudden break to escape. As he came through the door he ran plump into my arms; and somehow, before I thought, I struck him with my fist."

"How long ago was thet" asked Ryan.

"About twenty minutes."

"Oh! Then of course he hain't well enuff to do much talkin' jest yet, is he?"

"Not *very* much. He is lying on the floor over there."

Ryan was able to get up by this time, and rose at once to have another look at the man who had with one blow robbed him of mother and sister.

Just then the door opened, and several of the hunting party entered. They had been searching in vain for the spot where Marian and her father were hidden, and came in, with disappointed faces, to tell the discouraging news. That immediately diverted Ryan's attention from the subject which had engrossed him.

"Can't find 'em," he ejaculated. "Don't talk like thet! They must be found, ef we hev to rip up every board in the hull blasted shebang. Come with me. Great snakes! *I'll* find 'em, or I won't leave a piece o' this shanty big enough to pick yer teeth with!"

Followed by the others, Ryan left the room. Dan and Esther were the only ones remaining in the apartment, excepting Persimmon Bill, who was still senseless from the blow he had received.

The two were silent for a little space. Somehow, they felt constrained in each other's presence. The sensation was a new one to both of them. Perhaps it was because they had never been alone together before—at least, not since they had become thoroughly acquainted with each other. The stillness became oppressive at length, and they both began to realize that it must be broken before long, or it would become seriously embarrassing.

"Ahem!" said Dan, after a while.

Then he relapsed into his former condition. But about that time a new idea struck him. It would do to start the conversation with anyhow.

"Do you remember, Miss Esther," he began, "that once we had a brief talk about my identity?"

"Yes, sir, I believe I do," she responded, without lifting her eyes.

Dan smiled. That "sir" seemed rather strained, everything considered.

"Well," he continued, "I promised at that time to tell you on some future occasion all about myself—or at least I intimated that I would do so. But I could not well keep my promise until the object of my stay in this country had been accomplished. But now, as I firmly believe, I am at liberty to talk with entire freedom."

"Then I am to infer that your 'object' has been attained."

"Certainly."

"Was Persimmon Bill that object?"

"He was."

"And you are——"

"A United States detective."

Esther looked at him with renewed surprise, mingled with curiosity. She had often wondered at the mystery which enveloped him, but had never imagined that such a bright, laughing, dashing fellow as Sycamore Dan could be in reality such a dread personage as detectives are commonly supposed to be. But a roguish expression soon overspread her face.

"Then that elaborate story about your life on the Wabash was all moonshine?"

Dan actually blushed.

"I am afraid I shall have to plead guilty, Miss Esther. But I had work to do, and to have told the whole truth about myself would not have been like business—don't you see?"

The detective began to feel a vague sort of wonder at himself. A month ago he would have gone on in the even tenor of his way, acted as best suited the performance of his duty, without a single momentary thought of explaining his course to anybody. He had always maintained that no person had the remotest right to ask his motives for any act he chose to perform, so long as his course was not criminal. It was nobody's business, he thought, and yet, here he was, actually apologizing for having used deception. And to a woman, at that! It was a new sensation, and though shame is not enjoyable under ordinary circumstances, yet he really felt actual satisfaction. The whole thing was inexplicable to him.

"Well, I forgive you!" said Esther, archly. "But you mustn't do it any more. I am afraid detectives as a rule are not reliable persons. They cannot be,

it seems, and perform their labors successfully. And if a man prevaricates once how are we ever to be sure he is not doing the same whatever he says?"

"Yes, but you see my case is different."

And Dan proceeded to relate, in the fullest way, the causes which had led him westward, his former relations with Bill Creighton, and his adventures since he started on his perilous journey. He talked with animation until he had finished his tale, and then his voice dropped. He hesitated an instant, and then falteringly concluded:

"I thought Miss Esther, that as there was just a bare possibility of our again meeting in the future, it would be only just right for me to tell you about myself before I go away."

"Before you go! Are you—I mean, that is, do you intend to start so soon?"

The girl spoke eagerly at first, not realizing the construction that might be put upon her words. Then, when the sentence was half uttered, she tried to remedy her error, and made an extremely confusing affair of it. She was very pretty as the blood rushed to her face, dyeing her cheek to a deep carnation hue.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LAST OF THE BLOODSUCKERS.

Dan regained his courage, and rising, approached close to her, so close that she could feel his warm breath upon her forehead. He took her little trembling white hands in his, and gazed fixedly upon her.

"And should you be sorry to have me go, Esther?"

There was a world of tenderness in his voice, which told her more than the words themselves. The flush deepened on her temples. She looked up shyly for an instant, and then her eyes fell again to the ground.

"I — should — be — sorry — to—part—with—any—friend," she replied, softly.

"But if you loved your friend, if your friend were all in all to you——"

"Oh, then I should not—*could* not part with him."

The words were impetuous, and came from the heart.

Dan's arm passed quickly around the yielding waist.

" And then, may I hope, Esther, darling Esther, that you will not—cannot part with me?"

She was not a girl skilled in the art of deception. What came into her mind found utterance through her lips. There was the clear light of truth in her eyes, as she looked into his face, an expression of infinite trustfulness.

"You may not only hope, but if you will it so, you may be sure!"

He gave one gasp of joy—of happiness too great for words to tell, and then catching her up in his powerful arms as lightly as if she had been an infant, he imprinted upon her lips a burning kiss.

"Wal, doggone my skin, ef thet don't jest take the cake! Chaw my buttons, pardner, but you're the luckiest chap I ever see! Ho, ho! Caught in the act!"

Turning quickly about, the lovers saw, standing in the door-way with a grin of satisfaction on his face, Posey Ryan. Behind him were old Doc Harper, Marian, Robinson, and the rest of the hunters.

With a glad cry Esther rushed into her father's arms, and in another instant was embracing both the old man, and Marian, by turns, scarcely knowing, in her joy, which made her happiest.

The hunters, led by Ryan, had pretty well turned the house upside down in their endeavors to find their lost friends, who were at length discovered in an underground passage, somewhat similar to the one in which the scout himself had so narrowly escaped.

Once reunited, the friends were very jubilant, and longed to get back again to Fort Hays. But one thing remained to delay the consummation of that desire and, that was a proposal from Ryan.

"I s'pose," he said, "thet we mought ez well hev this thing out with the Bloodsuckers now ez enny time. They'll be back from their trip to Fort Hays in a very few days, 'cos they'll diskiver thet ther proposed prey ain't thar. In the meantime we kin be fixin' things so's to make ther welcome one thet they'll be likely to remember ontil they forget it."

The hunters were not only willing, but anxious to

get revenge for past wrongs, and so cheerfully set about the task of fortifying their position.

It was one sunny day in May that the men who had been appointed to watch for the coming of the robbers, came riding swiftly in with the announcement that they were in sight.

In ten minutes every man was at his post, and all was in readiness.

The affair was so arranged that not a man could be seen by the Bloodsuckers, as totally unsuspicious, they approached the rendezvous. And when they entered the little valley they were completely shut in.

Then a rifle cracked. It was the signal for the onslaught.

Completely and terribly surprised, the villains showed little resistance. In twenty minutes not one of them stood to tell the tale. Every man among them was dead.

They had fallen into just such an ambush as they would have laid for others. The revenge of the hunters was completely and fearfully executed.

Only one incident of the battle requires especial mention, although the deeds of blood done by all the hunters showed bravery and determination. It was tacitly understood, in the first of the fight, that Hatfield was to be left to the tender mercies of Robinson, who only wanted a fair chance to settle the score which had been standing long between them.

They met, early in the conflict, and without an instant of hesitation on either side, began a terrible hand-to-hand fight.

Hatfield had nearly recovered from the wound his antagonist had inflicted upon him previously, and he fought like a tiger. The two men strained and

tossed about in their endeavors to overcome each other, and it soon became evident that they were pretty evenly matched. Finally Robinson missed his footing and fell heavily. The long, sharp blade of his enemy was raised high in the air, and poised an instant, as if in hesitation where to strike.

That instant of indecision saved Robinson's life, for just then the sunlight was darkened by a shadow, and Vixen, with a savage growl, closed her muscular jaws upon the scoundrel's throat. Mangled and torn, he staggered to his feet, tottered an instant, and fell forward, stone dead.

* * * * * * *

The stream of my story flows rapidly to its end. In a week the party, with Persimmon Bill Creighton, counterfeiter, burglar, highwayman, and murderer, safe in their clutches, arrived at Fort Hays.

Two days later there was a quiet marriage ceremony in old Doc Harper's cabin, and two brides and grooms were united.

There was a short season of merriment at the fort, after which the hunting party reorganized, and started again on their travels.

Upon the same morning a wagon-train, guarded by a number of heavily armed men, started eastward.

One of the vehicles contained Esther, Marian, and their father. In the one following it, shackled heavily, lay Bill Creighton, who was guarded night and day by Robinson, Ryan, Dan, and Vixen.

From the time of his capture he had scarcely spoken, and he retained the same moody demeanor through all the long journey to Washington. He brooded and sulked until he was worn to a shadow.

During the trial which succeeded his arrival, he suddenly broke out one morning a raving maniac.

The suits were immediately discontinued, and he was sent to a secure asylum, where he finally died, not more than two years ago. One of the physicians who was with him in his last hours says his hair and beard, which had grown to a great length, were as white as the driven snow, and he appeared always to be haunted by the reproaches of some beautiful vision.

Upon his death-bed he was violent and troubled, until suddenly pushing his hand underneath his pillow, he drew out a coil of deep black hair. This he pressed passionately to his lips, and in an instant his ravings ceased. The tears rolled down his cheeks in two great streams, and murmuring, "Now, oh, Heavenly Father, I am at rest—have mercy on my sinful soul," he passed peacefully away. Dan received the full reward which was offered for Creighon's recovery. Of this Robinson was forced to accept $10,000, and Ryan shared the rest.

Old Doc Harper died a year later, and was sincerely mourned.

Just in the pleasant suburbs outside New York there are two cottages, connected by an arched and blooming vine-trailed arbor. Here reside Dan Burdette, the retired detective, and his warm friend, Posey Ryan. With them lives Jack Robinson, ex-Bloodsucker, but now a solid and influential man of business.

Almost any day, going by there as the dying sun touches with magic hands the beautiful and neatly kept spot, you may see pretty children running about the yard, playing with a strange-looking pet which answers to the name of "Vixen;" while two middle-aged couples, whose identity we may readily guess,

sit contentedly beneath the shade of the fragrant arbor.

It is a glimpse of Arcadia.

And though the fairy sunbeams die out and the shades of evening deepen, the love-light shining in the eyes of those friends as they sit, calm and contented, never fades or grows less.

Though gray hairs and wrinkles may come, though age may wither, that beautiful affection, which never grows old and never dies, will always irradiate their beings. For theirs is the true, the everlasting love.

(THE END.)

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